

MARCELA CARBO



FATE'S
LONG
SHADOW

A PRACTICE OF POWER NOVEL

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BLACK CRATER BOOKS

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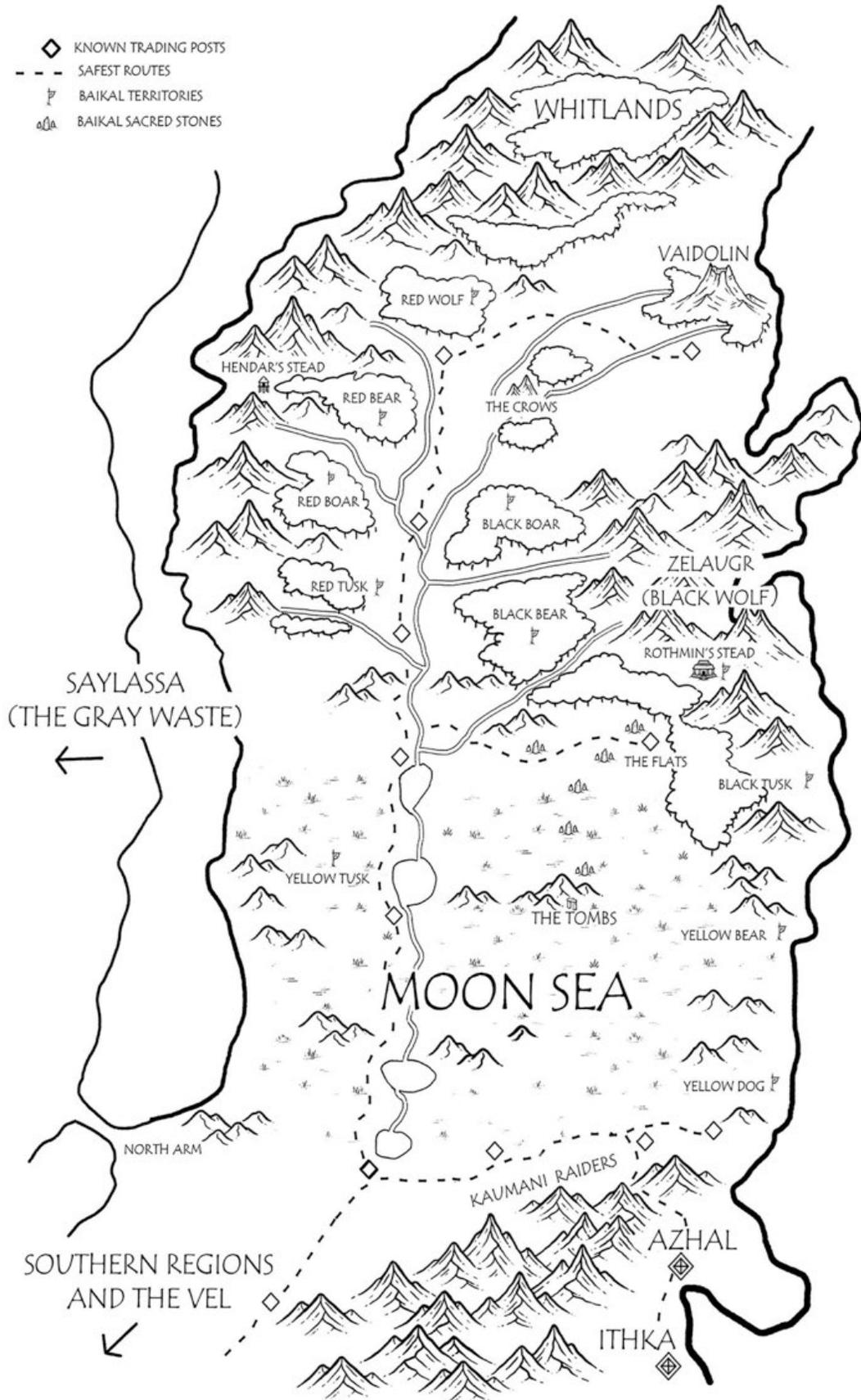
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TRADER'S MAP OF THE REGION

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Observe a priestess's face and you'll see the woman. Study it and you'll meet the goddess.

— A MORNAE SAYING

B *y the light of blue fire, my mother looked like a ghost. Her long, white hair glistened with goddess-light, her gray skin took on an otherworldly glow, and her eyes sparkled like two gems in a silver setting.*

Eye of the Goddess.

The people of our village gave her that title. They claimed she knew the future and the deepest truths of their minds and hearts. Her word could soothe and mend them, bringing peace to their bodies.

Her children, by blood or word, and all her people, gathered around her as she sat upon the village's sacred rise. Like the Temple's spire at the center of Vaidolin, with its great globe full of light and power, she held the god-word for us. We sat at her feet to devour her words as wisdom from the goddess.

She'd insisted we gather. There were rumors of war in our ancient homeland. Unexpected visitors were at our border seeking

her aid.

“Tell us a story, Rahli,” one of the Faidanu boys said, calling her by the affectionate name the Faidanu used for their mothers. Other great persons might have taken offense, but my mother only smiled, her face serene. She was a Mornae matron and needed no reminder of her status.

Her long fingers adorned with kithaun rings beckoned, and I drew close. I alone was her natural daughter, her heiress, and I was prouder of that than anything else in my life. I knelt to her left, at her knees. Her left hand, warm with power, slid up my back to the nape of my neck. The pulsing Dark crept through me at her command.

I was only thirty, an acolyte of the goddess, but my mother had started my education early. My priestess trial would come soon.

My mother’s feelings flowed into me, rushing like a spring torrent, preparing the way for what she would speak. She pressed her thumb to the base of my skull and her fingers to my jaw. Heat braced my head.

I opened my mouth, possessed of her spirit, and spoke the words she wished to share. The story was four hundred years old now—a tale from twenty-five hundred years after Saylassa’s destruction. It was the closest thing to legend that we knew.

Every time she told it, I learned more about how she had risen to her power.

All turned dark. My vision stretched to a tunnel until I knew myself within her skin. I was seeing through her eyes.

A child of eight.

White smoke writhed into the Yatani's sacred niche. I inched back from the opening, my feet crushing tiny effigies shaped in beeswax, forms of their ancestors and gods. Offerings of berries and flowers squelched between my toes, their fragrance entwining with acrid fumes. Birch bark tapers singed with iron brands twisted and twirled above me, each taper bearing the name of an ancestor. The Yatani claimed the cliff side niches were sacred, and my mother had not contradicted them. Veins of blackrock—*kith*, my mother called it—streaked its walls.

All that existed for me shone through the niche's entrance. My mother stood at the entrance, a dark shadow against the growing firelight of the burning village. Beyond her an even greater shadow loomed—a giant twice her height, a crazed, monstrous shape cutting through the smoke. The stars of the Bear and the Owl flickered above his head. Starting with the Bear, I recited the names of the stars I could see. *Dalxtera no'Baronaste*, then *Xal*, then *Rel*. I recited their names like a prayer to focus the mind, as my mother had taught me. The litany lulled me into a sleep-like trance.

The giant's roar brought me back. I receded into the narrow fissure, pushing past cobwebs and the decaying straw screen the

Yatani used to block off the deeper portion of the crevice where they believed the dead dwelt. I wanted to meld with the cave wall and, if I could, disappear forever with their dead. But the rock wouldn't take me. Instead, it pressed against my thudding ribs, reminding me it wasn't all a bad dream. The tapers crashed above me from the power of his breath, a frigid wind rattling my bones. He stomped the ground and my legs quaked.

But my mother stood as solid as the mountain above us.

The air cleared for a moment. The glow of a burning longhouse revealed the bulk of him and his grimacing, furious face. With his left hand, he held up a mass of writhing ropes. In his right, he shook a heavy maul. The ropes curled like vines about his thick forearm and massive hand. The vines gripped and squeezed so hard his fingers turned pale. They reminded me of the viper pit kept by the village shaman.

He roared and grunted and barked at her, but I didn't know his words then. I wanted to understand him and the anger seething in his breast, but they sounded like the crashing of waves in a raging sea storm.

She raised her left hand and uttered what I guessed was a curse in his own tongue. From her lips, the words sounded smooth and sharp, like her dagger.

Enraged, he threw the coils of rope at her feet. His bushy hair shook in the orange haze as his terror-laced breath blasted us. Tears streamed down my face; my body shuddered. But my mother stood ready to fight, her fists at her sides. He pointed at the coils and roared his words. The power in them enthralled me, but I did not understand their purpose. And then I realized he wanted to take her captive. That he intended to bind her with the ropes. He was offering her a way out of an inevitable battle and death. The Dark Goddess's

priestess, born of an ageless and powerful people, would not yield. Her pride would not allow her to be anyone's thrall.

She unsheathed her *kithaun* dagger in a long arc, cutting a shadowed gash through the dense air. A swathe of blackest night and starlight trailed in its wake.

The giant's eyes widened as a quavering chuckle escaped his lips. She meant to do battle with him. He looked up and muttered. Lightning rippled like veins across the cloudless sky. He laughed, surprised his god had answered, and raised his mallet. Lines of white light descended toward him, enveloping the iron head of his weapon with crackling power. The air hissed and sizzled like fat on a fire, and his thick arm quaked as divine power surged through him. Without warning—he moved faster than I expected—he swung at her. His hammer *whiffed* as my mother glided away. The battle had begun.

They exchanged blows—a ritual dance, such as shamans do.

Earth cracked.

Sky thundered.

Rays of black and white sliced through the screen of dust and smoke. Their gods battled for my benefit, like the re-enactment of a legendary song.

My mother awed me: lithe and tall, silver-white hair waving like a banner, her dark limbs strong. Even though he filled me with terror, I couldn't help but admire him. My nose crinkled at the biting smell of his sweat mixed with the white heat of his magic. The power of their gods, laced in their movements, mesmerized me.

But *they* were just flesh and blood.

Curious, I peered around her to get a better look as she maneuvered in front of the niche's entrance. Behind her attacker, more shapes crashed through the haze, their outlines unmistakable.

Three more giants thundered toward us. They roared when they saw my mother, huffing and snorting like cornered bulls. I sensed the swell of emotion in that great mass of flesh. For I had a gift—trivial, she called it—of knowing the sensations in the bodies of living things. And from those sensations, I knew feelings, and sometimes thoughts.

One of the new giants threw a handful of their rope shackles at the battling giant. The giants exchanged roars and barks. I couldn't tell whether it was laughter or anger. The ground and rock trembled with their heavy steps and bellows, and I with them. Another giant tossed my mother's attacker a rope, but he batted it away. He snarled at his comrades, but made no move toward her.

I crept along the wall toward the entrance to hear them better. A strange sensation was brewing in me. *Fear*. But it was not my own, it was theirs. They feared my mother.

The giants hemmed the combatants in, forming a half-circle around them against the cliff side. It seemed to me like an eternity of waiting for the inevitable. My mother remained undaunted. She whipped about the giant, striking with her dagger, a flurry of shadow and starlight in her wake.

I inched closer to the opening, trampling through the Yatani's offerings. I ached to see her.

My mother sliced across the back of the giant's thighs, and he squealed and bleated like a wounded boar. Fear ebbed and flowed in me from my toes to the crown of my head. Then his rage washed back over me. A rising tide... thunderous waves of pulsing blood, stretching skin, flexing muscles, and straining joints. I grasped at the stone and felt nothing of my own. He swung at her, roared, and then stumbled back, the gash across his muscled thighs seeping crimson. He crashed down to one knee, mallet thudding into the earth, kicking

up a wave of dirt and gravel toward my niche. I turned away into the blackness of the fissure as debris pelted my back. A stone smashed into my fingers where I gripped the wall, but I choked down the cry trapped in my throat. My face trembled against the strain of heavy sob.

A stillness fell over me in that thin sliver of safety. I dreaded what I would see when the dust cleared. My mother slid back to the front of the crevice and hope bubbled in me, pushing aside the roiling torrent of the giant's sensations. The rock of my cave seemed to groan, drawn to her, the *kith* gleaming in streaking pulses. Her power was building.

The giant's outline rose above her. He raised his glowing mallet to the sky once more, his arm trembling. He called on his gods again. Veins and sinew protruded from his throat and neck as he tried to draw power down to himself. It only sputtered and crackled above him. The ground shuddered as he stomped and hollered, moaning and whining. His gods had forsaken him. It sounded like the end of his world.

His earnest desperation washed into me, lapping at the shores of my mind. My mother had told me to tamp down my talent and use it only once I became an experienced priestess. *Power comes like a flood in the beginning*, she'd say, a swollen river destroying all in its path. Mastery lay in summoning a drop of water, not a river. *Rivers were easy to summon*, she'd said. Surviving them wasn't. Only a veteran practitioner could use the goddess-power—*zaeress*, she called it—rather than let it control her.

I hadn't learned that lesson yet. My little power ran rampant through the giant.

I'd unleashed a flood.

Each moan and cry, grunt and bark, swelled in me, and I followed them to their source—creeping up the length of him, through his heaving chest and thick neck—until I was at the pulsing base of his skull. His feelings, as simple as they were, became clear to me. I crafted words for them with each of his rough breaths. His thoughts sparked in mine, then slipped away.

The giants had not expected to find someone like my mother in this village. She was a creature of legend to them, an ancient enemy. She was a priestess of Vai, a moon and goddess like no other. Vai rolled over the world from south to north. She'd move across the lands of Vailassa every ten days to her throne, the seat of her power, Vaidolin. That black crater, a marvel, was home to the Mornae, my people. They had cast her out for reasons she never shared. I feared her exile would soon end in death, all because of me. What was an eight-year-old child compared to a woman who'd lived thousands of years?

Hers were the cycles. I had barely learned to breathe.

The giants snorted and let out shrill cries as shadowy tendrils gathered at her dark gray hands. From those quivering threads of Dark, she wove a protective shell. Her form blurred within those otherworldly shadows, but her dagger glinted like a swathe of stars with each slash. Just steel to the Yatani, but in her hands, it would cut through anything that opposed her.

The giants howled as the shadows enveloped my mother, and two of them stepped back. One fled, such was their dread of the Mornae. But the giant she battled had committed. A slick film of his own blood covered his limbs, and his eyes peered out through a curtain of dark, sweaty hair. If he turned his back on her to flee, she would kill him.

So he struck out at her.

Blow followed blow. A strange sound warbled in my ear as his hammer pounded against her protective shell. She skittered away from him, and they traded places, the giant's backside and legs concealing her from me. I inched toward the opening and huddled down in the niche's shadowed entrance.

The giant kicked one of the rope shackles at her, furious that his strikes had so far failed. I peered into the layered shadows protecting her. She grimaced, like she knew I was looking. The rock of my cave creaked, and the shell strengthened. She raised the *kithaun* blade above her head, keeping it nestled in the crooks of her hands. Her eyes blazed and her lips parted. Panting. Sighing. Then, her face contorted, her slender brows furrowed into a spearhead of hatred. Cruel pleasure marred her otherwise serene face. I'd never seen her like this, and I feared her as the giants did.

A thick shadow rose from the earth, devouring every sound and shred of light. A deep silence settled on the world. My breath lagged; my heartbeats stretched. Time crawled forward, held in check by my mother's command. The shadow rushed upward, gathering into a blue-black thundercloud.

Her eyes closed to slits. Her coarse wool dress clung to her as she stretched upward. The torn hem waved like a veteran's banner. Her hands closed on the blade. She rocked back and forth as if bearing the weight of the universe.

The shell rose a foot off the ground, and she with it. Her toes pointed down to the gushing font of Dark born of the earth.

Desperate to stop her, the giant slammed his mallet on the shell, but she remained unmoved within it. He yelled to the others, but they only watched, anchored by fear.

The night sky turned pale blue, brighter and brighter, like a summer's day. A roar like rushing flame through a dry forest

followed.

My mouth gaped open, breath caught dry and silent in my throat as a pillar of brilliant blue fire crashed down upon the giant. It crushed him to the ground, dust billowing up around him as the greedy flames enveloped him. The pillar shook and quavered above, reaching to the heavens from where she'd brought it forth from a rent in the world's fabric. My mother looked up, her lips trembling with effort. At her command, the torrent hissed and tapered to a point, cut off from the source. It collapsed on him like a crumbling pile of stone.

He tried to stamp out the fire, rolling about, but the blue flames only raged further, multiplying and strengthening. He struggled to his feet, flailing about, reaching for my mother, screaming, but nothing—not even a giant's rage—could stop the unquenchable flames of the Dark Goddess.

The giant collapsed and rolled past the niche, blue flames licking at his body, devouring it until it crumbled into hills of dust, swirling in the little wind gusts he'd made upon falling. It was a terrifying marvel, the power of a priestess.

Zaeress rippled through me. I licked my lips as if it were a sweetness in the air, a luring call.

Blue flames cavorted over what remained of the giant's corpse and danced toward my mother, looking for another victim. They crept up the shell and gathered an inch from her hands, blocked by the shadow shell from consuming her. I'd expected the flames to disappear, their purpose fulfilled, but my mother had more use for that blue fire.

The other two giants staggered backward. The one who had fled watched from a distance. They looked up again, muttering their prayers and regretting ever being born. That regret sat sweet as honey on my tongue. They faced something beyond their strength or

that of their gods. Their worst nightmare, all the stories they'd heard, had come to visit them that night.

She stood in that shell, bright with pale light, a perfect silhouette, beautiful beyond words. The goddess incarnate. I smiled, thrilled to be Mornae, to be like her someday.

The flames built up around her. Like the arms of a blue star, they leapt out in three arcs toward the remaining giants. The giants tried to run, but the blaze followed, and one by one, devoured them all. Their pain, bright and furious, rippled through me. I felt myself glued to them—trapped. Only when the fire consumed them whole could I wrench myself away.

The blue fire would consume the world if it could... and me with it.

My mother lowered her hands and called the remaining flames, crackling and raging in all directions, to herself. Little by little, they diminished, dying on the protective shell as they sought her. The flames disappeared just as they'd arrived: from nothing to nothing, from the Dark back to its goddess. They were not her friend, just a tool, and they'd turn on her if she proved weak.

The goddess is fickle, she'd often say.

The ashes blew toward me, and I covered my nose. My chest heaved, wanting to cough, but I had to be silent. She turned then, her knife gripped in a blood-drenched fist. I saw in her eyes something I'd never seen before. The giant's feelings in me drifted away to nothing, and my mother's emotions replaced them, just as terrible, just as furious. A heavy stone in my gut.

I must remain in the niche.

It was not over.

A knot built in my throat. The ground rumbled beneath us as more giants ran toward us. I'd already exulted, thinking the battle won, but my mother's body trembled, exhausted. She was a powerful vessel, but she was still just one woman relying only on herself to empower, attack, and defend. Matron of one. A lonely exile. A bitter exile.

Sadness for her overwhelmed me. She would have scoffed at seeing my tears for her. She wanted something different... something stronger than me. I wanted to be terrifying and powerful, like her. My little fists clenched. I told myself I must survive the night for my mother's sake, and for the sake of my *lorisse*, my Mornae house.

"House above all," I whispered.

The giants' corpses smoldered as another giant came at my mother. Taller and wider than the last, he had fists like boulders. White war paint on his arms and legs shifted and writhed over his massive, bulging muscles. Globes of pulsing blue light, stars in an orange haze, dangled from his waist and across his broad chest. They clinked with each swing of his hammer.

My mother tried to block the mouth of the crevice. She brandished the dagger in her right hand, that sacred blade of her ancestors stained red, and with her left, she drew out the Dark to

feed her defensive shell. If she feared, I did not see it. She seemed to be all power and resolve to me. Emboldened by her, I inched closer to the mouth of the niche, the flapping cloth of her ripped tunic beckoning. I could have reached out then, joining her, standing with her.

The giant bellowed, every inch of his massive body primed to kill. His footsteps shook the earth, and the vibrations snaked up through me. I shrank back from the entrance once more, my heart numbed with fear. He swelled in size, arms outstretched, claiming all the space around my mother. Saliva flew from his mouth with each snort and growl. Musty, pungent air buffeted my face.

He did not impress my mother. At his next clumsy swing, she sliced through his fleshy calf, and he howled. I froze at the sound, the terror greater than anything I'd ever known. Blood sprang from his cuts, but my mother's strikes only encouraged him. With each blow, his rage increased, and her shadow shell quivered, weakening.

She stabbed his thigh, burying the black blade for a half-second. It came out with a sucking noise, blood gushing, and the giant's pain flooded me. She then slipped under his outstretched arm and stabbed at his rump. I covered my mouth with my hands, tears pouring down my face. My head was growing light, and my stiff hands shook against my lips.

I'd made a dreadful mistake.

I'd let my guard down—the fortress of my mind crumbling—and allowed the giant's rage and pain to take root in me. No longer did I gather his sensations like ripples on a lake's surface. No, they were *in* me. They dragged me down into the depths and became a part of me.

My mother had called it *my little gift* with disdain on her lips. She'd taught me to focus on the feelings that mattered most, to learn

from them. But that day, I'd neglected her teaching, allowing the giant to rule me.

Form powerful and exquisite in her movements, my mother whipped about him like the wind. He swung wild and furious, trying to catch a piece of her in his mallet's sweeping path.

My tears dried. His rage throbbed through me, crushing all reason. I caught the white gleam of his eyes in that field of matted black hair and purple-faced fury. His feelings were my own, and his thoughts blundered into mine, rampaging. He was desperate because my mother was an invaluable prize, but he had no skill except to destroy.

And so he did.

Helpless, I watched his hammer swing at her over and over. It struck the mouth of the niche and shards of stone flew at me, striking my face. I yelped and covered my mouth. Blood and tears smeared across my quivering face, but it was too late. The giant roared and turned his snarling face, teeth bared, to my hiding place.

He lumbered toward me, blotting out the light. My throat ached—*all* of me did, trembling and tight with fear. He was too large to fit into the crevice, but so close, the size of him overwhelmed me. His left hand, each finger the length of my forearm, reached into the crack. Nails squealed as they raked the cavern wall. His other arm fended off my mother's next attack.

He barked at me, laughing and greedy-eyed, spittle shooting at me from thick purple lips. He tore at the stone with his hand, and it flaked under the pressure. His grunts and breaths filled the space. His fingertips pulled at my tunic, tearing the threads like he was separating them on a loom. I shuddered to think of those fingers on me.

My mother struck at him. The blade plunged into his forearm and raked across it, cutting through thick cords of muscle and sinew, scraping across bone. A blood-curdling screech filled the crevice. His chest puffed out and his eyes bulged at me. He'd thought himself made of iron, but she'd cut him open like a rabbit. He stifled the urge to scream again.

Pain rippled through me—his and mine and my mother's all melded together inside me.

He grimaced and turned back to fight my mother, switching the hammer to his good hand. His other twitched uselessly at his side. The fear of his impending doom did not last. A giant's rage swelled in my slight frame. Blood raged through taut muscles. Sinews tightened and flexed. Heavy bones jarred as he stepped toward her. The held breath of his enormous chest heaved in my own.

His mood had changed. He no longer wanted to capture her.

Bright shocks of light crackled above him. His god's power seemed to intensify with his unbounded rage.

I pushed against his horrid feelings, a stench burrowing in me. Desperate for my mother, I struggled to find her presence—not carefully, as she said was proper for Mornae, but with all the rage of that giant within me. I needed to know her before the end.

Past the frenzy, I found her. She was as delicate and strong as her blade, flashing like a thousand stars.

The fortress of her mind fell for me. I knew the strength that was a priestess of the Dark Goddess in battle. Fierce and terrified, but at her core she was steady, like the depths of the sea beneath a storming sky. Hers was a lineage of millennia-old sorcery, yet she was only one against so many god-favored giants. Her defensive shell quavered, the power around her diminishing. There was no escaping it now. No chance for peace.

Her thoughts poured through me, trying to reclaim the place the giant's rage had occupied. I understood then that she was only there to protect *me*. Had it been just her, she would have run, escaping through the deep shadows. Her defensive shell would fade, her strength would give out. Her every movement flowed through me, and I noticed her fading power. It trickled out of her, rejoining the earth and stars. I savored those last seconds with the woman who would have taught me marvels. She'd have guided me through the cycles.

I'd never seen her use these powers before. Her place amongst the Yatani, lesser men unfavored by any god, was to mend and heal with herbs and be their soothsayer. They believed she could see and speak to the gods. The villagers respected her, if not loved her, but they had *always* feared her. Now I knew why. My admiration for her expanded like the black sky above, and I understood, in a small way, her secret pride in being the matron of a Mornae house.

The giant rained down that huge, heavy mallet, an unrelenting downpour smashing away at her store of power with each strike. He'd consume himself in a rage just to kill her. Dust and flame and crackling light obscured my view, and I covered my face.

The final blow struck: her bones cracked and crunched. Her mind screamed—for herself, and for me. I felt the blow longer than she did. It shuddered through me. A final breath escaped from her chest, but silently, like the goddess. She died while her body drifted through the night air and fell into a heap.

Her final thought echoed in me: she should have killed me. At least then her daughter would not suffer the humiliation to come. Not that I'd be a thrall—though that possibility, too, anguished her. Not that I would face the constant danger of these raging giants. No, it was more subtle.

The greatest risk to the Mornae was their practice of power. The goddess had called them across the world to the crater to kill them, or to raise them up to the stars. There was no middle ground. She'd always called my gift *little*, but at her death, my inexperience with it had filled her with dread. I'd have no one to guide me, and my little power would consume me.

She'd despaired. My mother had despaired of me ever fulfilling my destiny to be a matron in her place.

The victor raised his good arm to cheer, stomping about and trying to rouse his mates, but the other giants only stared at my mother's body in silence, shaking their heads. A new fear was rising within them. They looked about, glancing up at the sky, expecting retribution. They argued amongst themselves. One of them spoke a word that would plague me: *draka*. *Curse*. To kill a priestess of the Dark Goddess brought only catastrophe, a curse lasting through the generations. As his anger waned, my mother's killer shook his head in denial of what he'd done.

A massive crash sounded, and screams rose from the village. Other giants must have torn down the wooden palisade. The villagers' fear drove the giants outside my niche into a frenzy. My mother's killer gripped his injured arm, his mind clouded by pain, and he urged his fellows onward to the village. He grabbed up the bindings, then turned to me with a loud snort. His mouth twisted in a snarl. He wouldn't forget me.

Smoke, dust, and firelight filled the stone fissure, and the shadows of the giants lumbered away. I did not weep. I became still.

My mother was dead. My matron.

I, Jassae, was the last of my house.

The night stretched on without end.

The echo of the black-haired giant's voice still rattled through me, and any movement led to a violent trembling in my hands and legs. I stared out of the niche's opening, a jagged window on the world. All was bright yellow and orange from the fires. Choked screeches disturbed the beauty of swirling embers, the climbing columns of ash and smoke. A mother screamed, a gurgling moan, and then was silent.

My eyes glazed over, refusing to accept what had happened—what *was* happening—despite all they'd seen. I tried to sleep. I wanted to sleep and never wake up.

Something in me refused.

I *need* to witness it. The goddess demanded it of those with my gift. My eyelids flickered, straining against exhaustion.

The form of a man cut through the dusty screen of firelight. He was struggling through a trampled field of wild barley. He intended to flee! I crept along the cavern wall, mouth agape, to call out to him, but only croaked. Was it Fedor? Yes! My heart brightened as his ruddy, round face came to mind. My hand reached toward him,

trembling. He was a tanner. A good man, I thought. I could escape with him.

Heavy steps rumbled behind him. The mighty blow of a giant's mallet crushed Fedor into the ground. The giant, more than twice Fedor's height, kicked his corpse—what remained of it—across the field.

I blinked with each breath, numb. The Yatani were mice living in a world of lions and bears. The giants overwhelmed them. My mother had been the villagers' only real defense.

The giant's face lit up as another thatched roof burst into flame, sparking and popping. In time, I'd learn to read a Baikar's face, the twitch of their lips, the crinkling around their eyes, the sighs and grunts. But at that moment, I loathed myself for just looking at it. He lumbered back to the village in a rush.

I inched to the opening and peeked around the edge.

Flames crackled and roared as they rolled through the houses. The twenty-foot-tall palisade of upright, heavy logs came crashing down. The Yatani's pride lay in ruins.

I gripped the stone but stayed put. How could I help the villagers? Their deaths, their suffering, settled in me. A village of only twenty households. I knew them all by name. Their world had been mine. My mother and I were creatures of legend to them, but they'd accepted us as their own. They'd felt favored by our presence. I sighed.

They were not.

My mother had caused their destruction. I'm sure of that now. She had driven the giants into a blind rage. Had she surrendered, more Yatani would have lived. And then what?

No, it had happened for a reason. My mother could not yield. She *should* not yield.

I sought their feelings with my power, but the Baikal's raging emotions dominated them like the cries of tiny sea birds caught in a squall. I'd seen the sea as a small child. Somehow, I remembered it now. The villagers were a tangle of fleeting sensations as the giants crushed their bodies and removed them from the web of fate, their histories forgotten.

My lashes lowered, as if by blurring my vision I could avoid the tragedy of it all. Vulo, a trapper, flew through the village commons, thrown like a child's doll, arms and legs bent, broken and flapping.

Giants roared in what could have been laughter. It all sounded harsh and ugly. They chased the villagers down, across the fields and into the houses. There was no escape. Everywhere I looked, there were huge shapes and shadows.

And in that rage, I sensed something else. A joy. A *pleasure* in their power over smaller folk. The Yatani *were* small, even for unfavored. My mother had towered over them, and I was as tall as their women. And yet they'd seemed resourceful, possessing knowledge. My mother had never spoken ill of them, despite her pride in being Mornae.

I couldn't fathom the giants' need to dominate these people, and I hated myself for allowing their chaotic feelings to take root in me. Their rage burrowed in me, urged on by my goddess-gift. My mother had enraged the giants beyond their ability to reason, and they'd forgotten why they'd originally come. That was the first and most important lesson I'd learn about the giants—the Baikal, as my mother had called them. Their rage, when ignited, would only increase until it destroyed their enemies or themselves.

Giants tore the doors off the meeting hall. Then the roof, walls, and anything else standing in their way. Inside the buildings, women shrieked. Giants ripped children from them, arms and all. The brutes

cast the babes to the ground. The women were more valuable to them, but the giant's rage destroyed them. I moved back into the depths of the fissure, to hide, to deny, to forget. Their cries followed me as I crammed myself down in a crack, hands over my ears as if I could shut it all out.

Do not run from your goddess-gift, my mother would have said. It will seize you to lift or crush. Follow your path along the winding Dark.

Her stern gaze, silver eyes set in gray marble, filled my imagination. I wiped my eyes and face of tears and grime. It was the least I could do before performing this sacred task.

I opened myself. My child's mind sought them unrestrained. I took in all the villagers' sensations and feelings, remembering them, and writing the record of them in my mind and heart. Dread settled in my gut.

What would happen when the giants finished with the village?

"Goddess above," I said, my supplication weak. My little fingers found a vein of *kith* running through the cave wall. I rubbed it, but no power came to me. My mother had taken it all when she'd slain the giants. I recalled her control and perfect movements, tall and graceful. It seemed perverse to think her beautiful at the moment of her greatest defeat.

I wanted to vanish, carried away by the wind. Me and all those lives filling me to bursting. One by one, their faces repeated in my mind.

Never forgotten.

My head rested against the stone. Sweat, blood, and grime glued me to it. A sigh escaped my lips.

Time crept by.

Only the brightest stars shone through the black-blue sky. The creaks and crashes of crumbling houses punctuated the peacefulness of the coming dawn. What gruesome sights would Sayin's light reveal?

I'd hoped the Baikal had forgotten me and moved on, but the vibrating ground announced their return. I gripped the stone like it was my mother's skirt.

My mother's killer peered into the fissure. Torches crowned his head. Four Baikal stood behind him.

I took in their feelings; I couldn't help myself. Untethered and wild, my little power did what it willed, binding me with each breath to these monsters. The horrible inclinations of their rage-addled bodies saturated me as they argued. I could do nothing but shiver, pressing myself to the cavern wall.

Why couldn't they leave me to my sorrow?

The torch-crowned giant tried to tear the stone niche apart with his good hand. When that failed, he poked into the cave with a stick, but I was behind a fold of rock. His hair was dull black, a mess of braids soaked with blood and peppered with ash... all the horror of

his battle with my mother and his rampage through the village. His eyes held nothing but hatred for me. I pressed my lips together, holding down the need to cry out, but sticky tears clung to my face.

He wedged himself in, his shoulder filling the gap, and rammed a tree branch at where my head was. It ruptured against the stone as I ducked and showered me with splinters and leaves. I fell away, tripping over a Yatani screen, fumbling for another place to protect myself. He roared at me, his breath like a wind, and my legs trembled. He strained to reach for me, but I'd tucked myself deep inside the space, my rail-thin body pressed behind stony grooves in the wall. His stick waved just in front of me, and he growled and grunted at the rock that stood in his way. Every muscle stood out, every vein bulging, eyes bloodshot. His teeth ground together so hard I thought they'd shatter.

From one breath to the next, no longer able to hold his rage welling inside me, my gift so full of all that had happened, I became enraged. The world shifted before my eyes. For the first time, hidden threads of power, known only to the god-favored, manifested themselves to me. The veil separating the worlds lifted from my senses.

Goddess above... I should have known only beauty and awe, but wrath dominated me. Shadows, the Dark, bristled at my feet. Fury took hold of my small body, and I screamed at him. Every limb, every hair, every bit of me thrust itself into that scream. The stone creaked and shook. A *crack* like ice splitting filled the air, and the giant stepped back, eyes wide and lips trembling. He dropped the stick.

I hated him, and I'd hated nothing at all until that day.

The sound continued, the gap between each *crack* lessening until it became a long, deafening hum. I'd called the goddess. The Dark. He stepped back from the fissure, his legs set apart to keep him from

toppling over. Time slowed. I savored the moment, the terror on his face.

An idea took shape in my mind... the faintest whisper that suggested I might kill him with a single thought. I relished it. My nose prickled and itched, and a glob of blood rolled down over my lip. More blood trickled from my nose, clogging both my nostrils. An oozing warmth filled the wells of my ears. An unseen heat parched my mouth and throat raw. My bones seemed to blacken inside me. The sky warped and altered, turning bright.

An unseen fire was building.

I recorded in my young mind and heart the feelings, the last moments, the dashed hopes, the dreams... *all* of it. Of giants and villagers and my revered mother. Together, we would make a pyrrhic offering to the goddess.

My rage built to a crescendo, and I saw doom preparing to rain down on us.

Just then, a deep voice called out from behind my attacker. As the giant turned, an axe sliced his head clean off. Blood sprayed into the fissure, turning the air red. The body collapsed with a heavy, dense *thud*. The head rolled and settled, eyes squinting, mouth clamped down in a twisted grimace. Rivers of thick blood flowed from his severed neck.

Startled by the blow, my rage eased, and the hum faltered, slowing. I wiped my nose with the grimy sleeve of my tunic. Tears welled up. The sight of his hacked off head horrified and elated me.

The Baikal argued and nearly killed each other. I didn't know their tongue and could only decipher words that seemed familiar, but it all ran together like competing blasts of horns. The arguing died down as one of them stood out as the victor. The others cowed away from him, weapons low and heads down.

Hendar, they called him.

This Hendar took the severed head by its black braids and hoisted it high alongside his axe. Spit shot from his lips as he shouted his words.

Curious, I sought his feelings. Despite his size and power, he expected to die or for the gods to curse him. He hoped to slow the gods' judgement by showing them what he'd done to atone for my mother's death.

He spun to the four corners of the sky. At each corner, he rattled the head like a witch's charm stick, pleading for the gods to accept his offering. Blood drizzled from the severed head like rain. Hendar's great arms trembled as the hum continued, though faltering, the stone all around us creaking and groaning. He hummed too, awkward and unpleasant. Lightning crackled from an empty sky, and together with the breaking stone made a deafening sound. He laughed and howled his giant-man's words, shaking that hideous, severed head. Our shared display of power pleased him.

Satisfied that no evil would immediately befall him for the death of my mother, Hendar set the head down and barked orders to the others. I could not say how I knew his thoughts, but I knew his feelings like they were my own, and I gave words to those feelings.

Then, he crouched down by my niche, setting his weapon on the ground and laying his hands open for me to see.

"There, there, little priestess," he said in a low voice. He spoke Yatani, though his voice was too large for whispering. "No need to awaken your divine mother and father. No need to anger them. Rest now, little priestess."

I slumped against the warm stone, my grimy face sticking me to it once more. Goddess-power throbbed one last time and dissipated into a great beyond I could not fathom or understand. I wanted to

obey and rest, but I could not. The last of my house, my mother's legacy must survive the day through me. The goddess had given me a gift to destroy my enemies, my mother's enemies, and I'd squandered it.

What manner of war could I now wage on these giants?

Could a child quell that rage?

Hendar slapped a massive fist into his other hand. Then he smiled at me. "First, let's do right by your great mother." He rose and commanded the other giants with words I did not understand.

The Baikal made a pyre in view of my hiding place. They tucked fallen branches among the logs and lit them with torches, each giant adding his own flame. When the lowest logs were burning hot enough, Hendar placed my mother's body, silver-white hair caked with blood, on the pyre. The other giants fanned the flames with their hands. A god-favored corpse must not suffer the flames long.

Fire roared to life under my mother's body. Goddess above, I wanted to run out and embrace her before she left the world.

The giants stood in silence as her body burned. Hendar's eyes welled with tears, and they dribbled down his face and over his beard. He intoned a song in his own tongue, low and haunting. The other Baikal joined in. Now that their rage had dimmed, they realized their peril.

I might have grown angry. A person without my gift would have. Instead, I wandered the halls of their massive bodies. Through their mighty limbs, all the way to their fingers and toes, I drifted, as if in a dream. Fear rippled through them now, running as deep as their rage had before. The goddess would punish them for killing my mother. They had made war with her by touching her priestess. I closed my eyes and let the sorrowful groans of their singing lull me to sleep.

When the sun crested the cliff side, majestic and radiant, my eyes flickered open and beheld its light falling on the world as if nothing had changed. Birds chirped. The wind blew.

Hendar sat in front of the niche. Smoke from my mother's pyre still crept along the blackened earth behind him. Despite my terror of the giants, I could not help but behold him with awe.

In the morning light, my savior's hair blazed like a torch, thick, bushy, and gathered with loose leather bands. Wild strands stood up in the breeze. He wore a leather harness from which hung his globes, all dim now, and short breeches of stained and bloody hide. Leather straps bound fur wrappings around his massive calves and feet. The red hair grew down his chest and along his shoulders like fur. His beard covered his entire face and neck, except for a pointed nose and two thick-lidded eyes. His bronzed skin, gnarled and knotted, bulged with hard muscle. Veins as wide as my fingers wound over them like rivers. He rubbed at cuts and scratches like they were insect bites rather than wounds. They'd healed through the night, and only bloody reminders stained his skin.

His down-turned axe meant he offered peace—or at least a truce—between us.

He sat vigil over me. I thought he must have been the giants' chieftain since they brought him food and drink. He didn't shift his gaze once from the crevice. He would wait for me to rot or join him.

I knew it.

I felt it in him.

Through the day and into the night, he watched the niche. When he needed to relieve himself, he put another giant in his place. I took this other giant to be his son because of the younger giant's flaming

red hair. But he was never away for long. Hendar had little trust in his son or the others.

I watched them from my now stinking hiding place. Urine had run down my legs and pooled at my feet. I craved water. Every inch of me ached from keeping myself at the ready. My bloody fingertips gripped the cavern wall as if intending to hurl it at them.

Hendar just waited me out. He valued me. His thoughts were clear, unlike those of the other giants, who continued to grumble at him. But they feared him, and so kept their distance from the crevice. They were busy anyway, packing the spoils of their pillaging.

Only twelve Yatani had survived. I picked them out one by one, but I could find no joy in my discovery. Their sorrow was too much.

By the second day of Hendar's vigil, the other giants grew more brash. The yelling between them was a storm. They wanted to leave me behind. Hendar stood and cast a handful of metal tokens to the ground. He waved them off, urging them to leave him if they wanted to, but they didn't want to leave without him since he knew the route. In the end, they picked up the scattered medallions, laying claim to all his thralls but me.

Only he could claim me now. He tossed no shackles at me, though.

Still, my mother's immense pride simmered in me, refusing to let me give in. I embraced the stone, and I whispered to the goddess, asking for help.

I thought for sure I'd die that night.

Hendar gobbled his meal, slobbering all over himself. He licked the grease from his thick fingers and picked pieces of whatever it was he'd eaten from his beard. Water dribbled from his mouth, luxurious and abundant.

He motioned me to him as if enticing a starving wolf to eat from his hand.

The smell of burnt flesh sickened me, but I would eat that charred meat off the ground if he offered it. He must have known.

He washed up with a damp cloth—no doubt a Yatani's prized linen—then he reached behind himself and presented me with a pretty, bright blue cushion. I knew it well. It belonged to a village elder. Hendar set it in front of himself and patted it with his fingers. His hand could encircle my body, and I recalled the countless horrible things I'd seen that night.

He smiled at the cushion and at me, but I refused. Whether from weariness or fear or my mother's pride, I couldn't say. It was the other giants who woke me from the delusion I could stay in that sacred niche forever.

They shouted like he was deaf. One even threatened to kick the cushion. The ground vibrated with each stomp. My goddess filled

them with dread. One giant, slathered in blue paint and grime, pointed to the sky, his eyes wide. The goddess would soon dawn and discover her priestess dead. Hendar nodded, but said nothing. He, too, feared her coming. The others snarled and sneered at him. He'd taken on the burden of my mother's killer, one of their own. He wouldn't allow them to harm me by abandoning me, but he agreed they would leave by dusk.

His son walked away from him as well.

Hendar shook his head and rubbed his fingers together as if he still held the tokens. Everything depended on me now. He looked at me as if he'd heard my thoughts and held out his hand to me.

You won't survive here alone, little one. The death of your mother was a great crime, and I paid the blood-price. But it is not enough to satisfy the Dark Goddess's thirst. We must leave here. There are wolves and circling birds. If you come with me, I will protect you as the greatest treasure.

Those were the words I put to his feelings. I could not know if they were true, but *he* felt true. His eyes were clear, light brown with dark blue flecks. I found them pleasing, the only part of him that was. His lips moved with his thoughts as if speaking secret words to me. I was like a little bird he coaxed onto his palm. Our fates were entwining.

My choice was stark and clear. Staying in the stone tomb led to death, and I didn't want to die. Not that day, at least. My mother said it was a tragedy for a Mornae priestess to die before her full cycle, and a cycle was a thousand years. Hers had been the wisdom of *four* cycles. The enormous time span stretched before me.

My mother had not done what she'd thought was best, and I had failed to exact revenge. My only choice was enduring the hardship to come. If I was strong enough, I could complete my first cycle, like a

true Mornae. Then I could redeem both of our mistakes. I set the intention in myself like sorcerers set theirs in the rocks of Vaidolin to make them do incredible things. Death was worse to me than surrender, despite what my mother would have thought.

I was a matron now. I was the mistress of a house of one.

“House above all.” The words came out crackling and undignified. I almost started crying again, but Hendar was staring at me.

I shimmied to the opening and stepped out of the fissure. I trembled, but held my chin up, propped up by Mornae dignity and pride.

The Baikal squatted down. All but three argued with Hendar, pointing at me. I must have looked a fright—a spindly, gray-skinned creature, my white hair stuck to me with blood and tears.

Come, little priestess, Hendar thought at me, his lips mouthing silent words.

I didn’t look to my mother’s pyre, to the smoldering ashes that remained of her form. She couldn’t help me anymore.

I sat on the blue cushion.

Hendar cast a shadow over me as he crouched down to pick me up. I balled myself up, light-headed, the terror long wrung out of me. His breath covered me as he grunted, trying not to press in on me. He carried me like a priceless jewel on that ash-stained cushion, taking me to a cage of pine and twined branches that hung on the side of a huge black musk ox.

The cage was ample enough to hold an adult. He’d padded it with felt and wool blankets woven by the Yatani, the same folk his group had just slaughtered or captured. A clay pot for relieving myself sat in a far corner. It was not of Yatani design, but had a band of yellow ochre around the lip.

He handed me a circlet of leather with a metal token dangling from it. He motioned that I should put it over my head.

I did, like it was a jeweled necklace, and he smiled at me, his enormous eyes crinkling. The necklace must have been of the type they used for women, because the metal token rested on my breastbone. Later, I'd learn it was Hendar's mark upon the metal, and that he bore its mate on a leather cord around his own neck.

He placed a loaf of flat Yatani bread in the cage with me, and a blood-stained water skin. Then he covered the cage with a tarp made of hide scraps sewn together.

The raiders moved out. I knew only what my mother had taught me of the world, and the village dominated by the Crows, and the mountain of *kith* with three black peaks. My mother had told me that beyond this range lay the lands of the goddess. Her throne was a massive crater of the purest *kith*. My mother had been born there, and even in her deep anger, she longed for it. In that crater, the Mornae advanced to the heights of their power. As for me, I'd been born in exile and carried no bitterness. I'd loved the Yatani and our life with them.

Through a seam in the tarp, I watched the mountain get smaller until there was no trace of it, and tall, thick fir trees filled my view.

I had no idea where we were going, or that it would be darker than the place I'd left.

I remained in the cage for two days. The Baikal continued to argue with Hendar, displeased with his actions. There was constant snarling and growling near me. Thralls cried out in anguish as giants yanked at their rope fetters. I watched through the tear in the hide tarp as they tripped and fell over each other. One giant, thick as an ironwood, gave up keeping his thralls all upright and dragged them like sacks of grain bound together.

“There, there, little priestess,” Hendar said in Yatani. He patted the cage and it creaked. He worried I’d react to the others’ threats and put on a display like I had in the niche. I was too weary, though. Too spent. I didn’t understand how I’d done what I’d done. Rage had driven me. The shame of my incompetence pressed on me. I wanted nothing more than to forget.

Sleep came and went. I nibbled on the bread, but it had grown hard already. I sucked at the waterskin like a lamb at its mother’s teat.

I stirred at the sound of rushing water: a river. I could tell by the sun's position we were traveling southeast. This river, too wide to be anything but a Finger, had to be one of the five major rivers of northern Vailassa.

We marched over the stony bank. Hendar barked orders at the others. Taut ropes hissed. Slaves cried out as giants pulled them kicking or sliding to the edge of the rushing water. It was then that I realized there were thralls of other tribes. The Yatani village had been the last target of a longer raid.

I picked at a loose thread in the cage's covering and made another peephole. The Yatani had avoided the river because it cut through lowlands where other tribes made their camps. To the Yatani, other tribes meant war. War had found them anyway.

Our train stopped often along the bank so the giants could measure the water's depth. They could cross anywhere, but their thralls, bound by the rope fetters, the tallest among them being half the giant's height, could not. A giant downriver called to the caravan as he crossed at a low point. The water reached his thighs.

The beast bearing my cage snorted as we crossed. Water lapped against the bottom of the cage, and I feared I'd drown. Hendar pulled on the reins, muscles straining, slapping the beast's rump and urging it on. Trains of similar beasts loaded with cages full of thralls trundled into the water.

Hendar had only me to worry about. He guarded me like a mother bear.

On the other side of the river, we camped apart. He took me out and set me on a boulder while he washed my cage and changed the pot. Giants stared and muttered their threats. Hendar kept his axe close.

The goddess had come and gone without destroying them. They'd survived for now, but she'd return in eight days. They thought she'd search for me, her stolen daughter, following me to their homes. As far as I knew, the goddess had never left her path in the sky. These giants must have known a story where she had.

The giants often yelled out a single word at Hendar: *draka*. Curse. Ill omen.

Hendar dismissed them with a grunt. He smiled as he offered me the blue cushion in his hands. I stepped on it and sat down. He'd washed his face in the river, but blood and grime still streaked it. Deep scars marked it. One made a jagged path through his left cheek and down his jaw, splitting his beard into lumpy folds of skin.

"Just two more days till the next stream, little priestess. And then the forest. And then the hills. Our home."

He grinned as he spoke to me. Uncertainty stalked him. So much had gone wrong with this raid... and yet something marvelous had happened. He'd found me. That was how I interpreted his feelings.

Our home. I repeated the words to myself in the quiet of my cage. They felt strange and hollow. I'd never really known a true home. Even with the Yatani I'd lived on the fringes, alone with my mother.

I dreamt of my mother often, seeing her face pressed close to mine so that I could almost see through her eyes. Her terror, hatred, and pain ran through me like echoes of her last moments. The cage would become dark with the deepest shadows, lunging left and right with each sway of the beast's backside, and my skin burned hot. I'd wake, and then cry myself back to sleep. Quietly, though. Mornae children bear the silence of the goddess. That was especially true of her daughters, her voice in the world.

It was unseemly, my mother would remind me, for a priestess to utter words or act in a way unworthy of the goddess—even in secret, because the goddess-power was ever present. So, I held my sounds deep down and pressed the blanket to my face. I would not weep for my mother. There was no reason to. She lived on through me, as unworthy of her as I was.

A deep fear settled in my chest, though. My mother had not yet declared me. The Mornae didn't acknowledge children until their mother, or a matron, declared them in a solemn ritual. Until that moment, a mother could gift the child, deemed insufficient for her house, as if she'd never been born. When my mother set my tenth year as the time for my naming, my worry that she'd part with me dissipated. We'd go to the foot of the Crows, the black-peaked mountain near the village, and there she would declare me her daughter. And more, her heiress.

There'd be no witnesses, no incense or oils, no bells or chimes, she'd said. Only the goddess. For we were exiles. Though the Mornae had blotted out our house name, the goddess had not. My mother told me of the beauty of our homeland, the beauty of our people. But every time, the memories stung, and she'd turn bitter.

None of that would come to pass now.

I begged the memory of her inside me to speak the words declaring me hers. No matter how much I yearned, I could not force the memory within me to do it.

Then, one night, during one of my deep and troubled sleeps, she did it, laying her hands upon my head—the goddess and the mountain behind her. She was only a tall, dark shadow before me. The goddess rose higher, sitting above us both, and my mother's features sharpened like a statue carved of deepest black and brightest white.

Her lips moved, but I heard nothing. She said other things, but no matter how I tried, I couldn't hear her.

I woke elated, joy filled tears streaming down my face. In my heart, I knew my mother had spoken our house name. I was a proper Mornae now, and could become a true matron.

I told myself she'd done right in not killing me. I would carry our line forward. For now, the name must remain hidden. I would prove her decision right. Someday, *someday*, my heart would release the name, and I would speak it as a matron.

An orphan's dream.

But it was all I had.

I woke later, groggy and exhausted. Fire light flashed into my dark chamber through the covering's stretched stitching.

Baku, the musk ox bearing my cage, shifted, and the contents of the cage drifted to one side. I caught myself and peered out through the little hole I'd made. Shadows danced against the flame-lit forest.

"Turn, Baku," I said to the beast. He snorted.

Like him, I wanted to disappear into that dense forest. The Baikal were arguing, arms raised and weapons in hand. I suspected it was because of me, or the dead giants.

Baku shifted again, swaying, each step rattling my cage.

The pot jostled and spilled its contents, but I was already filthy.

"Baku! Turn!" I hissed at him when he again refused. I yelled at him, and he finally turned.

My heart leapt as a shadow fell across my view and vanished.

A giant lay on the ground near Baku, but I couldn't tell which one it was.

The ground rumbled. Heavy footfalls surrounded me.

Baku swayed and turned again. Trees shuddered and cracked. One fell nearby. Leaves and branches dropped on the cage, irritating Baku even more. He snorted and lowed, pawing the ground. The

thuds and clangs of weapons and fists sounded nearby. Bodies shoved and pushed, grunted and bellowed, gurgled and gasped.

Baku whined and swayed. A rope kept him bound to a tree. I crouched in a corner near his head. I tried to shut out the sensations nearby, despairing that their rage would drive me once again. I choked on a cry as Hendar ripped aside the hide tarp and peered inside. Dark blobs of blood drizzled his face and hand.

“Are you hurt, little priestess?” he asked, voice ragged. Firelight danced on his bulging eyes. The pungent air crackled with his god’s power. I think he was drunk. They’d fought over me. He’d done desperate things. Again. Excitement and dread rolled into a ball choking my throat.

A voice behind him cried out.

I shook my head to answer him, but he’d already covered the cage again. It dangled off Baku’s side, and I grabbed hold of the bars to keep myself upright.

There was more fighting, and then cheers... roars of victory.

I stayed awake waiting, but Hendar didn’t return. The caravan moved again, but my body trembled and couldn’t rest.

In the morning, we stopped. Raiders with pitch-stained bears’ claws dangling from their arms left us. Again, they lobbed the word *draka* at Hendar, waving him away with their hands. *Bad smoke*, as the Yatani would say. Foul. Through a rip in the hide, I watched Hendar’s son hold his hands to his head in frustration and berating his father. The raid had gone all wrong. Hendar yanked a strand of bloody thrall medallions from his neck and offered them to his son. They must have belonged to my mother’s killer. Hendar tried to calm his son, but the young giant stomped off, tokens in hand.

The next day, Hendar fixed my cage, changed the pot, and gave me more bread and water. He’d dipped the bread in a watery gruel to

soften it. Then we set out with just his son and another giant following.

Beneath Baku's heavy thuds, I'd listen to Hendar mumbling, carrying on a secret debate with himself.

Black smoke rose above the trees.

Pyres. Pyres for more dead.

The goddess possessed an insatiable thirst.

My mother had been right. It was better to have died.

We entered a forest of ironwoods. Their dark, wide trunks blocked my view. Whether bark, rock, or flesh, giants would surround me from now on. Hendar followed a well-trodden path through the sparse undergrowth. We passed clearings with standing stones, but they looked abandoned. Thick vines clung to them, and mosses covered their markings. Weeds and grasses grew in their centers. No shamans cared for them.

I watched without ceasing, not wanting to miss the moment we arrived.

Axes thudded and cracked on wood. The rumble of deep voices surrounded us.

As Baku entered a wide clearing, a scattering of half a dozen dilapidated huts came into view. I called them huts, but they were enormous compared to Yatani dwellings.

The folk of the village glared at Hendar. One offered a grunt, and another thumped his chest with a gnarled fist. The thralls did not stop their work. Shorter versions of the Baikal stood watch over them, whips in hand.

A pair of these shorter giants, women in ragged dresses with unkempt hair, stormed out of the largest hut. They screeched at

Hendar. One scolded him with a bundle of lavender. He stood between them and my cage. He looked up to the sky and blew out air as they berated him. They stopped when he raised a hand to steady Baku. They glared at my cage, and I got lightheaded. What if he gave me to these hags?

“This is mine alone,” he said to them. His words were in a language similar enough to Yatani that I could understand his meaning.

“You’ve brought nothing for us!” one woman yelled. The other inched around him toward my cage.

He grunted and urged Baku to move again. Hendar must not be a chief. Not an important one, at least. No one respected him. He, too, must be an exile.

The women next assailed Hendar’s son with questions, but he waved them away and stomped off to his hut. His train of thralls followed behind him. Six of them, none of them from my village. Either he’d traded his Yatani, or they’d died.

My heart cramped. None from my village had come with us.

I could only imagine the destruction the Baikal had caused on their way to my village. My head pressed against the cage bars, and I dug my nails into them.

Hendar unfastened the cage from Baku’s harness and carried it into the hut. He hung it from a beam, and it swayed back and forth.

“Hendar?” I asked.

He turned to me. Sadness had replaced the glee on his face.

I used the Baikal words I’d learned on the journey. “Where am I?”

A fleeting smile broke out on his face. “Home, little priestess. You are home.”

“May I wash?”

His eyes widened, and he grunted. He'd neglected me. He ran up the steps to the hut's entrance and called for buckets of clean water.

When the water came, he brought in the buckets himself and shooed away whoever had brought them. He gave more orders to two others to stand watch. No one could enter, he said. Not his women, not his sons or daughters or any Veikal, or any hunter or thrall. He recited the names of every person in the village, just to be clear.

Once we were alone, he shut the hut's heavy door. He checked for peepholes in the log beams, though I wondered why. Wouldn't his son or the other giant talk about me... about my mother? They must have agreed not to. He removed the hide tarp and set the cage on the ground. He crouched to undo the clasp holding the cage door shut and stepped back to give me room.

The hut was vast, as large as two or three Yatani houses. A pitched roof rose above his head where the firepit's smoke escaped through vents. There were hooks for more cages, but only empty cages hung from them. He'd given up his claim on the other thralls to own me. First at the niche, and then to his son. How many thralls had he traded to keep me, his singular prize?

He fetched a clean cage from deeper in the hut and lined it with wool blankets. He paused. I was trembling from head to toe along with the hard-packed dirt floor. One can't ask a giant to keep the world from trembling when they walk, but Hendar tried anyway, stepping as lightly as possible. He set the new cage on a hook, crouched down in front of me, and waited for me to wash.

"My clothes are filthy," I said.

He grunted, heaved himself up, and went to the door. He cracked it open and yelled for one of his women.

Only when he'd placed fresh clothes before me, like I was a goddess myself, did I wash. I scrubbed and scrubbed, working my way through the buckets of water. When I'd cleaned and dressed myself, he offered me a board to step upon instead of a pillow, and then he raised me to my new cage. It was spacious, and high enough that Hendar could look at me without crouching. He cut slits in the hide covering like windows so I could look out.

Later, he brought me proper food for my people. Not giant food, meat and such, but nuts and berries—no doubt gathered by one of his other thralls because each berry arrived whole and undamaged. There was also a warm soup of sweet herbs and roots.

I slept that first night as I hadn't slept for days.

Thus began the next stage of my life.

Hendar cared for me, as he'd promised. Every day, he came with food, fresh water, and clean clothes. His mood had lifted.

At first, we spoke Yatani with a smattering of Baikal words. Then, he taught me Baikal.

He'd visit me, eyes twinkling, sitting cross-legged, the cage lowered to his level and the door open. He spoke the Baikal's words under his breath to not frighten me, and I learned. I learned to bark and huff and snort every syllable. His body's sensations taught me more.

One day, he patted his broad chest. "Tell me what's inside."

"You are pleased, Hendar."

I pretended to read his facial features, but he frowned. He wanted something more from me, but my goddess-gift was something I wanted to leave on my mother's pyre.

"There was a hunt, and you did well."

He beamed at me, nodding for me to continue. Despite his size and booming voice, I came to understand the roiling emotions, from rage to joy, of the Baikal. They were a fierce but simple people, their ambitions so unlike a Mornae's, whose feelings are mazes upon mazes and high-walled fortresses.

We conversed this way often. I'd use my little gift to discover the world through him, and he let me ask about it in turn.

"Who are those other men, Hendar? The smaller ones."

Like the giant who'd killed my mother, Hendar was tall for a Baikal, fourteen feet when he wasn't slouching. Others I'd seen were not as tall—only ten to twelve feet.

Hendar's face scrunched up. "Not all can have Barka's favor."

"Barka?" I knew what he meant already, but I wanted to hear him speak. I didn't want to answer everything through his feelings.

He grinned and winked at me. "Yes, little priestess. Barka is god of all the seas."

"Your women are Veikal."

"Yes," he sighed. They gave him grief every time he stepped out of my hut. "They have lost Barka's favor altogether," he said in a hushed voice. "But we've no other way to find a mate and have children. Someday, there will only be Veikal. And then only stunted men." He sighed again and his chest rumbled. "Except your kind, of course. But you have the Dark Goddess's favor."

Below the Veikal were the captives and thralls, but I didn't live like a thrall. I was Hendar's treasure.

Hendar never slept in the thrall hut, though sometimes he came in drunk to sit and talk to me. He'd ramble, often complaining of past disputes he'd had with his chief.

I didn't see his son again, or any of Hendar's other thralls. I knew he had others because he kept their medallions bound on a leather strap around his wrist. But my medal he kept around his neck. He'd hold it, and when sodden with heavy drink—the smell of it filled the hut—he'd burble on about my mother's death, calling on the Dark Goddess not to curse him.

I watched in silence. I'd give him no reprieve, though he never asked me for one.

At night, I sometimes heard the crashing of waves in the distance. Mountains surrounded us for miles, so it must have been the work of their shamans, an ancient magic of their people, which brought the sea close.

Sometimes, other Baikal visited the village, and they celebrated, so that their chants and drums and horns lulled me to sleep, and the crackling of the wood in their fire pits comforted me. On these occasions, the scent of broiled flesh pervaded even my lonely hut. I imagined great boars and moose and elk upon their spits.

Fights broke out often. One fight even threatened to bring the hut down on me in my cage. The hut thudded and creaked as the Baikal hurled each other against the logs. Hendar came running to check on me. An enormous bruise shut his left eye, but he grinned. He shook out the pain from his right hand. His feelings bubbled up in me because I'd feared for him. The memory-sensations of the fight flooded my own. A sharp pain throbbed in my right hand. He'd broken his opponent's jaw.

He turned to me, his good eye flashing. "Do not fret, little priestess. I am safe. This is just a little fun. No harm will come to you, I swear it." His breath reeked, and the sour smell wafted through the cage.

I nodded, but doubted his words. There was nothing about the Baikal that made me feel safe.

The next turn of events would prove me right.

A month later, once I'd become comfortable with my new life, Hendar came to me, looking more serious than usual. He lowered the cage and opened the door.

He'd dressed for ceremony. Barka's turbulent light filled his blue globes. His hair gleamed, braided with new leather bands. He'd even combed his beard with scented oil. Coils of silver ringed his arms. The symbols of their gods, drawn in white clay, covered his massive limbs. His harness and breeches shone, brushed and polished. A heavy mantle, lined with black bear fur, wrapped his broad shoulders.

He held his axe head-down between his booted feet. His hands rested on the butt. He looked magnificent. I knew his pride as he smiled down at me.

"I am Hendar, son of Wuld, born of Kralon and Hentha, born of Barka and Aelath. My people walked these lands before Sayin became a god."

He leaned toward me, bushy brows lifted. It was my turn.

My lips tightened. He'd treated me well enough, but he was a stranger. Not of my house and not my people... even though they

could never know who I was. Or rather, who my mother had been. I was of no consequence. Not yet.

I lifted my hands to my shoulders, palms out, as I'd seen my mother do for ritual.

"I am—"

Hendar shifted. Was this what he wanted? To know my name meant power for him, like knowing my house name would bring power to me.

I snorted. His desire to know brimmed in me.

"I am Jassae. Of the Mornae."

Hendar beamed. "Ah, Jassae. And?"

"My people conquered the crater and rode the goddess-light. Before that, the light of Sayin. Before that, the light of a thousand stars."

His eyes widened with surprise. I had no intention of shaming Hendar. Conquering the crater and its surrounding territory had meant expelling people from northern Vailassa—including the Baikal from the eastern cliffs.

"Good! Very good." He didn't press me for my house name or the names of my parents. I'd never divulge that information, even if I knew it. Not to him or anyone.

"If we speak of godly things, we should make the gods aware, yes?" he asked.

"Don't we need smoke?"

Hendar squinted, considering. "You are right, but I've no shaman nearby. Our words will have to do."

I lowered my hands and tingled all over with anticipation. I sat down on the wool blankets carpeting the floor of my cage.

He sat down, leather creaking and globes tinkling. His rump hit the ground with a thud that shook the cage. He tugged on his beard.

“What is it, Hendar? What do the gods need to be aware of?”

He shook his head. “Speak only when I ask, yes?”

I bowed my head, irritated that he’d silenced me, but also sad that things between us would change from now on. My mother would have done the same once I’d become an acolyte.

“Did your mother priestess teach you about your goddess?”

I shook my head, my lips tight. She’d taught me little. The Mornae do not teach an exact path; rather, they guide, because everyone’s path is different. And, sometimes, one could possess a unique talent. *The winding Dark is limitless*, my mother would say, voice fading, her gaze lost in a vast place. She’d tried to teach me about it once.

She pointed to the sky. “How far would you go?”

I looked up and found my favorite star. “There, Mother.” I stretched my hand, fingers straining as if to grasp it.

She took my hand in hers and folded the fingers down. “No. Never fix your destination. The Dark is limitless. It is behind that star and the next one... endless. Do you understand?”

I’d nodded, but I’d not understood. Not until I’d seen the Dark for myself, on the night she died. A Mornae should know no boundaries.

Hendar smiled at me. “You can tell me. I know you have gifts. I was there, remember?”

My jaw clenched tight. My mother had taught me to *never* share the utterances of the goddess with others. The goddess meant her words for the listener alone. I flushed as I recalled the night of her death in vivid detail. Not what it looked like, but what it *felt* like. That night, the rage of my attackers had driven me. I recalled my mother’s blue fire. It had taken more power to control it than to summon it, and she’d exhausted herself. But I’d let the gift overwhelm me. I’d lost control. Unworthy of a Mornae. That gift seemed more of a curse.

He grunted and rubbed the scar running through his beard.

“Search out the two outside,” he said. “Tell me about them.”

I stared at him, my face firm.

“Go on. You won’t hurt them.”

I already knew everything, though. I couldn’t help myself. It was like breathing to me. I searched everyone out—their bodies, their feelings, and if they had no mind fortress, then up their spines to their tingling thoughts. Not that I heard their thoughts. Their feelings were as thoughts to me. I made up the words to describe them. I’d made a game of it with the villagers. Happy for a good hunt, the birth of a child, sad when an elder passed, or a child from disease. Mild feelings for mild people. The Baikal were like the sea, and rage drove them. Even in their joys, it seemed.

Hendar would not give up. Whatever this ritual was between us, so formal and divine, he would wait until he had answers from me.

I made a small grunt, but his eyes just narrowed.

“The smaller one has to piss,” I said. “And soon. He worries he’ll not make the hunt next month. The other wants to taste the boar on the spit. And he has an itch between his legs.”

Hendar chuckled. My answer pleased him.

“This is good, little priestess. This gift is the way you can be safe among us. Strength is everything to a Baikal, but also fear. It drives us just as hard. You will cause fear because you are dangerous. Very dangerous to certain people. Many will see you that way.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want this power. He didn’t understand how terrible it was.

“Don’t worry yourself. It is your gift. Your goddess meant for you to have it.”

It was a throbbing knot of countless feelings bound up tight. It never ceased searching until I lay exhausted.

Thus began the first lesson. Giants shouldn't know so much, but he sounded wise. Later, I learned even Baikal sought learning, just as the Mornae dedicated themselves to the deepest knowledge of the world.

Unlike my mother, who'd warned me about striving to know the Dark through words, Hendar taught me that the Dark was in all things, passing through everything and binding everything. There was no smoke, no power, no globes without it. But only the Mornae had dared to harness its pure form.

"Follow its trail, little priestess, though gentle, like a spring sun," he reminded me. I didn't protest or refuse his teaching. He was all I had.

"Easy there, little priestess," he said once, tapping his head. "Very gentle. Like a soft breeze. We're not strong-minded like your people. We topple with the slightest poke. Creep about like a tiny mouse. We should never know you're there."

He never spoke to me like I was a child, with sweet cooing like people use with babies, but he never yelled or grew angry either. He was arming me for my future. The cries of pain coming from thralls, the violence outside the hut, reminded me of where I was. I would always be in danger while I lived amongst them.

"You won't be like your splendid mother, battling with a knife and magic fire," he said to me. "Still, you must be careful. You see how easily that wretched filth of a man killed her once she'd spent her goddess-power? A single blow. You must learn to survive even better than she did because you are tiny, and your gift is unlike hers." He held up two fingers, almost pressed together. He was right. I felt that small.

I wanted to argue that I, too, was a priestess, and all priestesses summon blue fire as proof of the goddess's favor. Reading his

feelings and giving words to them, I understood he meant something different. My mother, glorious as she'd been, could not survive what awaited me. It made sense, but how could my minor power, *trivial*, as my mother had called it, save me?

With each lesson, his mood changed. His concern for my future increased, and his concern became mine. My scarlet giant protected me, so I felt safe. I was too young to understand, to differentiate between his feelings and my interpretation.

I know now his own future was of utmost concern.

One night, during the late autumn, when clouds gathered like a thick blanket over the far north, he spoke to me during the goddess's passing, called *vaizora*. The goddess rolled over the world to her throne, her visage like pale butter. We could see her radiance through the little vents in the roof. She filled the night sky.

"Are you cold, little priestess? Do you feel the earth god's blood?"

"I am not cold, Hendar."

My mother had told me this was because the goddess had bound the Mornae to *kith* fifteen cycles ago. If we ever felt cold, it was because the goddess had rejected us and we were no longer Mornae, no matter what color our skin. No outward sign of favor could atone for this lack. While the blackrock rose high above the ground at the goddess's throne, it also ran like veins deep beneath the ground.

Hendar reached into a pouch and showed me a piece of *kith*. He rolled it about his palm and then set it down before me. "You know the blackrock is the blood of a god? Blacksteel needs the purest blood."

I took it in my hand, cradling its warmth. Blackrock surrounded the Mornae of the crater day and night. It shaped them... or ejected

them. I hugged it to my chest.

He chuckled. "It calls to the Dark Goddess."

My mother had said, *There are two kinds of exile. Of the Temple, or of the goddess.* The Temple turned my mother into an exile. It was a political thing. Exile of the goddess was worse. To live in Vaidolin was the Mornae's birthright, but each Mornae must earn it.

I sensed that the time had come for me to claim my heritage. At least, that was Hendar's plan. I didn't think it was how Mornae did it.

He bade me take the rock with me into the cage. Every day, he checked on me to ensure I was still alive. When he saw that I could tolerate the *kith*, he put more pieces in the cage with me.

The rocks sang when the goddess passed overhead every ten days, and when she departed, they hummed, awaiting her return. I don't think Hendar heard it. I held the *kith* close to my face, vibrating against my skin. Thousands of years of power waited for release from someone like me. Not *me*, but a priestess. I was just a child.

My skin blazed hot in response to the blackrock, and I slept naked. Each day, my bones became steeled to the goddess. Every Mornae entered the world at war with the goddess. Only the strong survived. Only the devout. The goddess had been trying to kill me since I was born, but in the end, we made a truce. I became her acolyte.

Like my mother's *kithaun* blade, the goddess forged me into something new. But it was all too soon. I was not even ten years old.

Other people rush, my mother had said, speaking of the villagers. But ours are the cycles, piled atop each other, to gain even the smallest morsel of knowledge.

Hendar must not have known that. He rushed me along.

He stopped raiding and hunting while he had me in the cage. I sensed his anticipation as if I were in his skin. Everything was a

preparation for what was to come. I accepted his teaching without question; I endured those small trials.

Excitement built in me for what was to be my fate.

One night during the goddess's dawning, as part of my instruction, Hendar took me out of the hut—hidden in a smaller cage—onto a ridge with a clear, sweeping view of the sky. He offered me a dress of fine white wool and bid me loosen my silver-white hair from its ties.

Once I'd changed, I looked like a shock of white light, like a spirit taken flesh. He motioned to a cluster of boulders. I scrambled up to the tallest one, and I stood there just above him.

"Raise your hands, little priestess. Honor the goddess. As your mother did before you, and her mother. Unto your people's beginning."

It felt wrong to mimic a true priestess, one who'd undergone the trials in the Temple of Vaidolin.

I shook my head. "I am just a child, Hendar."

His face sagged. He still seemed burdened by guilt over my mother's death.

"But you spoke to her," he said. "Only a priestess can do that."

He was right, but I didn't know *how* I'd done it.

His heart insisted. It was so important to him that I raise my hands to the sky, to the great dawning orb of light that raced toward us, rolling over the forests and hills.

He crouched and bowed his head. "You may speak your words to her."

What harm could it do? I recalled the sounds my mother would make before calling to the goddess. The names of stars. Just sounds that prepared a priestess's body to be a vessel for the goddess-power.

“Veeeeeel,” I chanted. That was for *Vel*, the fifth star of any constellation—if it had a fifth star. My mother had always favored *Vel*.

“Haaaaal.” For *Hal*, the third star.

Dal, Rel, Hal, Xel, and Vel. That was the order, but she never recited them that way.

My tiny voice carried far on that high hill, filling the night. Hendar beamed, and I smiled at his joy.

As the goddess drew close, I could almost reach her, my fingers grazing the light of her face. My hair gleamed with goddess-light as her presence filled me.

When the goddess moved northeast over Vaidolin, Hendar covered his head with a blanket, mumbling to himself.

I’d fulfilled another step in his plan, but couldn’t see the destination.

Winter came and went, and by spring, we'd spent every *vaizora* together on the ridge. I'd become proficient at imitating my mother's solemnity. I ignored the nagging feeling that I was doing something disrespectful. I was just pretending.

At our sixth dawning together, Hendar asked me to call the goddess.

"You did it before, remember?"

Yes, I remembered, and it had almost killed me and him.

He spilled out polished rocks at my feet and placed them around me on my pedestal. It was his way of honoring the Dark Goddess.

"The goddess favors you, little priestess. Little Jassae."

He uttered my name with a hush of awe. Among the Baikal, a person's name had power. Their *true* name, because Hendar was only his tribal name. Only the gods and their shamans knew his true name.

"*Gaurmin*," I called him. It meant "noble being," or at least that is how his feelings translated to words in my mind.

He nodded.

I decided once again to please him. I closed my eyes and remembered that night, the death of my mother rushing back to me

in waves of heartache and despair. Within that tortured memory, I raised my hands and called to the goddess like I had then.

The past and the present collapsed. My mouth opened wide, and I roared with the same rage and anguish of that night. The world shifted around me... or I shifted into it. Strands of power, infinite and uncounted, appeared. The strongest were those of my goddess. I reached out to one and plucked it like a lyre's string.

Crack! The sound broke into the world from the Dark and reverberated through every inch of me.

Hendar stood then, tears of joy welling in his eyes. He hummed with my goddess-call, as my mother had taught me to do with hers. He stepped to the edge and beckoned the far-off sea clouds, miles away. They tumbled and rolled over each other, dark and menacing. Lightning crackled miles away.

He howled with laughter as the two sounds mingled.

The two of us together shook the earth and sky.

I laughed, though my body burned. Blood trickled from my nose and stained the lovely white dress. I sat down and rolled over onto my back. The goddess loomed overhead, brooding, the palest white with a fringe of brilliant blue.

Hendar looked down on me, his eyes wide. "You are young to have such power, but fate has spoken."

I wiped my nose, smiling despite the pain and heat that braced my skull. I stood up again, hands raised to that pale visage.

Hendar beamed, his fists clenching and unclenching.

I laughed and spun on the rock. The world and my fate awaited.

N ights later, dozens of Baikal yelled and roared outside my hut. Horns blared. Shields and axes clashed. Dust and soot rained down from the ceiling as the ground quaked from their thundering steps.

Hendar entered my hut, rubbing his hands.

“This is a great day! A *great* day!” He paced back and forth, speaking in Baikal, smashing one fist into his other palm. He paused, holding both fists to his head and letting out a cry through gritted teeth. “At last! Aelath! At last!”

His joy spread to me. “Hendar, tell me!”

He hushed me. “Wait, wait. Soon. Remember, do not speak unless asked.” He avoided my gaze, but there was no avoiding my power. I’d never seen him so distracted—his gaze darting, thoughts and feelings roiling in him. His burst of joy turned serious.

A knock sounded. He rushed to the door and spoke to someone. Gripping the bars of my cage, I peered through the smaller gap in the covering. My little power rushed out, seeking answers. I couldn’t help it. It was one of his Veikal women. Bromma was her name. He shoed her away and returned with a bundle and a white garment in his huge hand.

He held the dress up. His gut twitched. A tight knot sat in his throat. He pressed the dress and bundle through the bars. "Dress, little priestess. Make yourself ready."

I took the bundle from him. His skin tingled as I brushed his fingers. "I will, Hendar."

His brow furrowed.

"I'm sorry." I held the bundle and dress to my chest.

"Dress. This is an important day."

I held my lips tight, keeping my words to myself.

"You *mustn't* speak, little priestess."

He struggled to say the next words, so I spoke on his behalf. "I know, Hendar. I'm a thrall."

He grunted.

I returned to dressing.

Someone knocked on the door and I stopped. It was one of the Veikal guards.

"Quickly!" he said to me.

I grunted. Hendar's eyes widened. I snickered at him like my life didn't depend on what was to happen. Like we were being joyful together. How wrong I was.

I slid the ice-white dress on. Tucked within the bundle were three silver chains. I draped them around my neck.

When I was ready, he lowered the cage and opened it. He'd spread hides and furs on the floor of the hut. Then he beckoned me out and motioned to a white fox-fur blanket. "Sit there."

I sat on my heels. He sat in front of me, legs crossed. "Listen, little priestess. Nothing will ever be the same after tonight."

I frowned.

He shook his head, more serious than ever. "From now on, everything you do, *everything*, will be important. Of the gods!"

I chewed my lower lip, resisting the urge to speak.

“Rigir, come!” he yelled over his shoulder.

An ancient Baikal entered. If he could straighten, he’d be taller than Hendar. Dozens of blue light globes hung from his waist and skirt of hides. His chest was boney and scarred, his great muscle wasted away. His hair was white, the top pulled back in a tail, the rest of his head shaved close. Dark blue tattoos, symbols, and marks ran across the ridges of his skull. Long, knobby arms clung to a staff bound in leather straps from which hung charms and wards of carved bone. He stood behind Hendar, head tilted, gaze narrowed on me. Curious eyes, bright yellow in the firelight, looked me over.

I responded to his perceived challenge by searching him out—my little power creeping up his legs, slow and soft like a mouse. His eyes widened, and he hissed at me. He barked a word at me.

“Goddess above!” I hadn’t meant to yelp like that, but the giant’s eyes had flared with bright white light.

Hendar was staring at me, brow knitted. This was important. “This is Rigir, shaman of the hill. And a Zelaugr—Black Wolf. He will witness.”

Hendar produced a stained, worn leather pouch from his harness. He unloosed the ties, forcing it open with two fingers. It sat in his palm as he showed me its contents: blanched bones, fine, delicate things, fingers and toes, and other shapes I didn’t recognize. He shook it, and the bones rattled. Tangled vines of crude symbols cut the surface of the bone. Pitch or blood stained the carvings. He set out a smooth hide with ornate markings of beasts singed into the edges. They grasped at each other, and in the center was the symbol of Aelath, goddess of the wind. Northern tribes held her to be a goddess. I called her *wind*, but the word meant the space between

earth and stars, a middle place where so much remained unexplained and changeable.

Hendar closed the old leather pouch and placed it in my lap. He wanted *me* to spill the bones out on the hide. His mother had read the runes and told fortunes. He wanted me to read my fortune and tell him what to do. He wouldn't tempt the Dark Goddess's wrath by deciding for me. The shaman was there to ensure I did it correctly.

I shook the pouch with both hands. His bushy eyebrows rose, and he looked to the hide. I spilled them out there—bones of hare, deer, and other animals. Human, even. Symbols coiled about them like Aelath's breath.

I reached for one, but Hendar shook his head. No one could alter fate, only read it. He hunched, expecting the shaman's rebuke.

"Read them!" Rigir said with a growl. "Do not touch."

I wasn't sure what they wanted of me. The bones held no meaning, even though I found the patterns curious. I dared not look for answers in Rigir, so I looked to Hendar instead, to his feelings and through them, to his thoughts. He smiled at me, his left hand hidden from Rigir, and motioned me in. His face slackened, looking over the bones. Memories played out in his mind.

Rabbit bones were fragile, and they'd fallen together. Bear's bones touched them, a grave threat. Bones of the wolf, shot through with black lines, nipped at the bear. Then there were the elk bones. And owls. The creatures of their world stood for one of their gods. And one flat white stone with gray swirls carved into it stood for Aelath. A single black onyx chip, representing Vai, touched it. I glanced at them both. The onyx was too tiny for any giant to pick up, and it had no markings.

They just stared back, waiting.

Hendar was constructing a strange story from the bones. His thoughts went round and round, trying to see the story he wanted in them. But the story must convince Rigid. I must delve beyond the obvious. I had to speak something not easily known. Something only fate could know. While Hendar fretted over the runes, I searched his feelings, coiled so tight behind his knitted brow. His mind opened to me, to what he needed me to know to satisfy Rigid.

Hendar hoped to please the great chieftain with whom he had long disputed. He couldn't hunt with him or sit in their moots. Unlike my mother's bitterness, a yearning to be with the tribe sat heavy in his chest. Hendar hoped to make a gift of me, his silver-eyed daemon.

This was when I learned I was a daemon, a spirit creature, a link to the divine.

Through his thoughts and memories, I understood the import of each bone, each mark, and their secret meaning, because he had learned their meaning from his mother. An intense desire to please him, to reward him for his care of me, for saving me, swelled up. Glancing over the bones, I prepared an oracle to satisfy both the gods and Rigid. I remembered something my mother had often quoted: *Those who read fate, determine it.*

My hands hovered over the bones, moving from one bone to the next, each building the fate I planned to announce. Then I spoke, solemn and otherworldly, like my mother performing a ritual.

"It pleases Aelath, Barka... and Vai that I should be a gift to the daughter of Aelath. Fate binds me to her. In her service, I will fulfil my destiny. There will be peace between Hendar and Trosgan, Black Bear and Black Wolf. This daughter of Aelath will honor the gods, will unite the Baikal, and will conquer Vailassa."

I didn't understand the ultimate import of the words, except that Hendar was giving me away. His treasure no more. My small feelings, as wounded and afraid as they were, had no role here. I was uttering ineffable things, divine things. Hendar's heart spoke of a desire, and I gave voice to it. But the last part, about the daughter of Aelath, I'd added myself. It seemed right. Warmth rushed through me, and I threw back my head, sucking in cool air.

The giants shifted.

"Little priestess?" Hendar asked. "Is that all the goddess says?"

I wouldn't press my luck. "I cannot see more until I fulfil it. There are only shadows beyond."

Rigir seemed pleased with this mystical explanation, and he muttered, "The shamans of the hill concur. She speaks for the Dark Goddess. None can deny it."

Hendar's eyes tightened with a fierce joy. He refrained from taking me in his hands for fear of hurting me. Instead, he stood up, arms raised, and roared his joy. His liegemen called to him, concerned, but he rushed to the hut door to keep them from entering. He commanded them to tell the chieftain that Hendar of the Zelaugr, the Black Wolf, would offer his new daughter a divine gift. He was of the Bear, but would surrender that name to become Wolf again.

Rigir stood to the side. The fire had died down to glowing embers, and his pale blue eyes stared through me. My secret talent sought him again, rebellious and defiant. This time, I was gentler and averted my gaze. A bubbling joy simmered in his gut, but he remained cool, cautious, and calculating as he took the measure of me; deciding whether I would be the shamans' tool, whether I'd stand with the gods.

All I wanted was the safety of my cage.

“When the time comes,” Rigid said to me, “you will make the sign of your goddess and speak her word. Like this.” Rigid’s eyes widened, and he stuck his long tongue out and held it flat against his chin. I stared at him, wide-eyed. I looked to Hendar and shook my head, frowning.

“Oh no, you mustn’t crinkle your face that way,” Rigid said. “You are of the Dark Goddess and the earth. Black stone and light... and Dark.”

To the Baikal, actions, expressions, and poses were like words. And more, they could be god-words. The mouth could be so twisted and deceitful, or wrong. Nothing worse than a wayward tongue. Hands or a face mask could always be divine. The Mornae also had poses and expressions for their rituals... just of a different kind.

I recalled my mother performing her rituals and held my hands to my chest, palms out. I lowered my gaze.

“Much better,” Rigid said. “Not as good as mine, though.” He cackled, but his eyes remained wary.

Hendar gathered up the bones and placed me back in the cage. His chest puffed with joy, and he blew out little breaths, a happy little tune. He hoped his gift would redeem him of a crime I could not perceive. He kept it well hidden.

A sadness overtook me then, as I thought I would soon leave the safety of his protection. The cage had been my home for months, and he had indeed treated me like a treasure. But a cage couldn’t be my home forever.

We made a journey of two weeks—slow because Baku and the other beasts moved more slowly than the giants—crossing forests, rivers, and plains. All Hendar’s people came along as witnesses to the birth of the chieftain’s twins, a girl and boy. I’d not perceived twins in Hendar’s thoughts when I uttered the oracle. I learned about them on the journey.

The words I’d uttered over the bones now weighed on me in the loneliness of my cage with its peepholes. Was there such a thing as fate? Why had I added the bit about conquering? I’d gone beyond what Hendar had needed me to say.

Had I made another mistake?

We reached our destination under the light of the goddess, crossing under her path to a dense forest with tall, blackrock mountains in the distance. We spent another two days waiting for their stars, those of Zelaugr the Black Wolf, to be in the best position for the celebration. I didn’t scoff at this; Mornaë consider the stars in everything they do.

As the Wolf rose from the horizon, Hendar again asked me to wear my costume. The time had come for my fate-thread to unravel.

Hendar, my scarlet giant, carried me inside a small, tight cage. I could only sit and look forward. A red wool blanket with the symbols of his gods embroidered in black thread covered it. The light cast through the cloth turned me crimson, like a blood offering.

I trembled as I sensed so many Baikal—dozens of them. Their shapes and forms cast shadows on the cage's thin covering. Braziers raged all about, and I startled as one sputtered and crackled. The giants' barking and grunting made more sense after Hendar's lessons.

My wicker chamber crunched in Hendar's hands as anticipation coursed through him. I watched everything through the strained stitches of the covering, but I understood the event through his feelings.

When his time came to make his gift to the chieftain, the Baikal murmured their disapproval.

"What foul wind brings you to me, Hendar?" the chieftain asked. "Black Bears always come on the foulest winds."

The Baikal chuckled, their bellows echoing in the space.

"A divine omen, Chief Trosgan of the Zelaugr," Hendar said, using the ancient name even though Trosgan hadn't. "Let there be peace between us."

Again, the Baikal murmured.

My little power unfurled into that massive hall, into the bodies of all those giants, but especially the chieftain's. My gift crept up his spine and found no defense within that thick-boned skull of his.

Chief Trosgan's woman had borne twins, and the great omen Hendar spoke of was that *both* were true Baikal. The boy and girl, born clasping each other, had wrestled their way out into the world. The girl was not Veikal, like all their women had been for a thousand years. No, she was true Baikal, the size of a boy. The chieftain's

woman, a Veikal nine and a half foot tall, had died. The birth had drained her.

“How can we be certain of this omen, Hendar?” the chieftain asked. “I have the boy I need to continue Rothmin’s line.”

I sensed a deception in the chieftain. He agreed with Hendar about the good omen, but not all present agreed. Daughters of Aelath, true Baikal women, born alone, were a good omen, but they were perceived as a bad omen when wrapped together with the future chieftain. Some clans thought his son could not lead at all because of it. Somehow, Trosgan must convince them the twins should sit the chieftain’s rise *together*. The shamans also wanted this. Apparently Hendar was the one who had the thing to help them achieve it.

A silence fell on the assembly, and I pulled at the stitching of my cage’s cover to see better.

Another Baikal shaman, fourteen feet tall, skin sagging on his bones, stood before the chieftain’s rise. As a child I’d learn to guess ages by studying the way the dark trickled through skeletons. My mother, the oldest person I knew, became my measuring stick. He was not that old, only around two hundred. Not ancient, like my mother.

Threaded layers of bones painted blue, from the dark grayish blue of a storming sea to the pale blue of a winter sky, adorned his chest and arms. The light-filled air crackled and danced across his pale skin. Globes of blue light bound with leather strips wrapped around his chest, waist, and hips, too many to count. Scars marred his skin, as only the greatest of warriors mastered the power of the shaman.

This shaman represented Barka, the sea god. Other shamans were also present—of the beasts, of the wood, and more. The Baikal

had shamans for every voice in the world except the Dark Goddess.

He raised his hands for all to quiet, but the murmuring increased. He then slammed his hands together and a sound like crashing waves swept through the hall. The giants hushed.

“We of the sacred hill have held a moot,” the shaman said, his voice like the rumbling sea below the cliffs. “I have walked the god-lands.”

My cage creaked as the giants pressed around Hendar to listen more closely. Hendar grunted, and his hands pressed more firmly on the cage. I made myself as small as possible.

“Barka himself spoke to me,” the shaman said. “Aelath concurs. The boy and girl are one flesh in two. They must sit the chieftain’s rise together, as one. This is the word of the gods. Let none speak against, or else... or else... Gods curse you!”

Draka.

To seal his god-word, the shaman contorted his face into a ghastly grimace. His eyes narrowed upon my cage, as if he knew what I was thinking.

A tremor raced through the crowd, and fear overruled them. Who could speak against the gods?

Yet, just as quickly, the mood shifted to a calm, windless ocean. I had wished to ease their disagreement, to make peace in their minds, and it happened. If only briefly. This was my second gift—useless among the Yatani, a temperate people. Among these raging giants, though, it was a hidden wind that soothed their rage.

The Baikal settled, and the chieftain, a smile on his face, looked straight at my cage. I swallowed hard. He stared eye to eye with me through that tiny broken stitch in the cover.

“So, you bring not foul winds, Hendar, but fair and sweet-smelling ones?” the chieftain asked.

The shaman shambled away, his long hide skirt dusting the floor and his globes clacking. He'd spoken the god-word. His task was complete.

"Let there be peace between us." The chieftain's thick lips pursed beneath a bush of chestnut hair. He held up an enormous fist, scarred, gnarled, and brown like the roots of an ancient oak. "But! That peace will depend on the quality of your gift. I will know for sure whether you mean it."

Hendar approached the rise and set my cage on the hide-covered floor. He removed the front cover only and plucked open the little door, crunching the twigs between his huge fingers.

"Come out, little priestess," he whispered to me in the tongue of the Yatani. "Speak the oracle. Make the sign."

I crept out and stood straight, chin lifted, dressed in my white gown. My hair was loose and full of goddess-light. My gray skin shimmered with a flower-scented oil Hendar had given me.

Like a sudden sea swell, the giants roared and grunted. The floor shook and my legs quivered, yet I remained standing, head up, as my dignity and pride demanded. The chieftain remained still on the rise, though I sensed he was unsure what manner of gift I was.

Hendar stood about me like a fortress wall. "For your daughter, mighty chieftain, Son of the Sea," he said over the din. "Let the sister goddesses unite, but with Aelath, goddess of the wind, supreme!"

Warmth raced up my legs in response to the growing threat. The goddess would protect me, but shadows would cause them to rage even more. I focused my little power into them, driving them to quiet. My head grew light. Giants snorted, huffed, or mewled as their rage simmered. Again, I'd lulled the Baikal to peace.

Hendar shifted, looking for support from any who would offer it. "Great chief, only for your daughter would I part with this treasure."

The chief scanned the crowd. “A thrall is a worthy gift, but *this* is a daemon. A curse, perhaps?” His eyes narrowed and his lip twitched. “And so puny! She will not last past my daughter’s first year. Must I keep her penned up like a bird?”

The giants gave half-hearted chuckles. They weren't eager for me to stay in the village.

Hendar's gut tightened. A shudder ran through him like he wanted to slap them all. “She has the favor of Vai. The moon goddess’s power is in her, Great Chief. Your daughter can keep her, penned or not. It is *her* choice.”

The chieftain’s eyes widened for the smallest instance. He wanted me for himself as a token of goddess-power, to hold against the shamans’ words, but that could not be. Hendar had gifted me to his daughter.

The tottering shaman stepped forward again, jealous of his privilege. “Any word this daemon speaks will benefit your daughter. To all others, a poison. It can be no other way.”

His cold blue eyes looked me over, but with respect. A terrible war could rage between us. For now, he sought peace between our gods. A slight nod, imperceptible to most, was all he offered me.

This god-word did not please the chieftain, but his god’s will bound him, too. He stroked his beard, then spoke. “Very well, Hendar. I accept this gift on her behalf. But first, let us see what she says on the matter.”

Trosgan motioned two women forward, and they carried a basket to me. They were Veikal, and eight feet tall. Too small to be true Baikal. They were the breeders—rare among the giants, a trickle of past glory. Until now. For the true terror plaguing the Baikal was the loss of Baikal women. What use were giant men if their women diminished and could no longer birth them? Even before the Fall of

Saylassa, there had been too few. Not in a thousand years had there been a daughter.

Hendar encouraged me to step closer. His breath was shallow and quick.

“Her name is Syral,” one of the Veikal women whispered to me.

“Yes,” the chieftain boomed, “because she is of the north wind!” The north wind was strongest. He’d revealed her name. It was a bold move, and not the first he’d make.

I approached the crib and looked down on her, her face and body all scratched up where she’d struggled with her twin. She was pale as moonlight, with onyx hair and dark eyes, though they’d lighten later. They’d become a lightning-lit ocean, for she was a daughter of the wind and the sea. She kicked and shifted, angry from the start, her fists raised. Her face blazed red.

Without asking, I reached into the crib and patted her head, soothing her, feeling her heart for the first time. She sniffled and huffed. I didn’t think she could truly see me, her gaze just darted about, but she did not scream. The red blanched to pink.

“Cursed,” someone muttered. *Draka*. The word rippled through those massive bodies.

Hendar spun about and the ground shook. I gripped the crib and held it firm. Even then, at that tender age, I endeavored to protect her.

“Do not speak against the gods!” Hendar roared. “A thousand years have passed since we had a daughter, and even more since one sat the rise. Now is the time to shower all gifts and blessings upon her. We were a great people once, and she is the omen that we can be again. We made the Dark Goddess a prize for her. Who will dare speak against it?”

The scoffers stepped back.

Gazing into those dark little eyes and that angry little face, joy-filled awe swept through me. I knew then that the bones had spoken the truth. I'd bound us as daughters of a goddess. The babe closed her eyes and slept despite the surrounding turbulence. It was the stillest she ever was for me.

And never again.

That very night, they showed me into my new home, making way for me. No one dared touch me. I didn't turn to bid farewell to Hendar. I sensed him watching me leave. His breath was strong, his chest buoyant, and that was enough for me.

The chief's women pushed the Baikal aside, and I stepped down into another enormous hut. Behind me, in the rise chamber, the Baikal remained still, disconcerted by all they'd seen.

There were no thrall pens or cages in the cavernous chamber—twice the size of Hendar's thrall hut. The women carried Syral's crib to a curtained-off section of the hut. One waved a bunch of sage in front of it. Then, they showed me to a Veikal-sized cot at the end of a row of cots.

They grunted at me. I held my tongue, as Hendar had instructed.

Just make it through the night, I told myself. And the morning, and the next day.

Still dressed in the lovely white dress—my priestess costume—with the silver chains hanging from my neck, I climbed onto the bed and slipped under the blanket. Once I closed my eyes, those women left, and others entered. They went about the business of caring for

the baby. I watched them through slitted eyes as they lit the hearth fire, boiled water, and tidied up. They were all Veikal.

I slept in fits, staring at the stars blinking through the air vents lining the loft to pass the time.

The next day, three shamans visited the hut. A loft rounded the chamber—like a second floor but too narrow for a Veikal. It was more of a shelf. They adorned a section with talismans and charms, singing and blowing their mystical smoke into it. Whether they were warding me or themselves was unclear. The head Veikal woman ordered me up into the loft. I climbed up the ladder. A stack of hides and furs sat at one end. The shamans left us, and the women turned away to do their chores.

I looked out through the loft's vents. The chieftain's huts sat high on a ridge. The rest of the village sprawled down the hillside in tiers. Surrounding the village were deep forests and mountains. I settled in while the women went about their chores. This was to be my new cage.

It was from the loft that I witnessed the real threat to myself. Hendar had warned me, but I couldn't have comprehended it until I saw it. Two Veikal men dragged a cluster of thralls bound together along the path leading into the chieftain's hearth yard. The Veikal pulled and tugged on them as two Baikal thundered toward them. The thralls froze, and the giants stepped through them, smacking them aside with the backs of their hands like they were nothing at all. Bones shattered, bodies squelched, and cries rang out. Their screeches dug into my bones. One woman screamed and screamed. The Veikal struck her across the back of the head, sending her sprawling. Her body twitched and stilled. The Veikal killed the damaged, slicing through limbs rather than removing the shackles.

The Veikal argued with each other. They shouldn't have brought the thralls that way. They'd have to pay the chief for the loss. It wasn't at all the Baikal's' fault.

This was my introduction, or re-introduction, to the Baikal. My heart shrunk within me. Why had Hendar treated me so well when he'd known what awaited me?

Other thralls cleaned up the mess. They worked fast to avoid the same fate as the dead ones. Soon, no sign of the destruction remained.

These thralls, the wise ones, showed me what I needed to be to survive. Like the bars of Hendar's cage, I pressed my hands to the hut walls. They'd keep me safe. I had to keep myself controlled, strong as *kith*, no matter what terrors I'd see from that day forward.

By noon the next day, when the drunkenness had worn off, giants filled the chieftain's hearth yard. The important among them bade farewell to the chief, pledging their loyalty. I thought I saw Hendar in the crowd, but others also had his red, bushy hair.

The women in the hut spoke well of Hendar. The chief called him a brother. It was better for him to leave without having others watch us say farewell. His eyes would have been water-logged, his shoulders sagging. Better for him to leave with the pride of his people buoying him up. I needed nothing for myself.

Still, I searched for him, my little power reaching farther into the crowd. My throat tightened when I found him. The bulk of him—the strain of sinew, muscle, and bone; the heft of his heart; his cavernous breath—but he was already leaving. The sensations faded. My fate had veered away from his.

I savored our parting. I didn't think I'd see him again. He was my last connection to my mother, to that night at the cave's mouth. We'd each shared in her loveliness and power, as well as her death.

After that day, echoes of his voice or of his presence deceived me. He was not nearby, but his feelings resonated in and through me for the days that followed his leaving. In time, they passed, dwindling to nothing. I mourned them as long as I could.

But not long enough. I could have mourned a hundred years more, savoring the sweetness of my memories, but fate intervened.

I had a new master, and her demands carried me headfirst into danger.

The next morning, a Veikal woman called Loga stood at the foot of the ladder to my loft. She was one of Syral's caretakers and ordered the others about. The rest of the women, three Veikal of varying heights, stood behind her. They had severe bodies of well-defined muscle sliding and bulging beneath sallow skin. Their bones poked out like they were too large or too long for their frames. They'd pulled back their stringy, light brown hair into buns. Crude embroidery adorned their short dresses. Their wide, thin-lipped mouths remained tight, and none offered me even a smiling eye.

Veikal were a middle folk, no longer Baikal, and their unhappiness flooded me at that moment. An indelicate people, so unlike my own.

I sucked in a breath and held it. At moments like this, my mother's lessons stirred in me.

Make every step a little death on the path to the goddess.

I inched closer to the edge of the loft. Death awaited me from this moment on, either intentional or accidental. Was it better to be dead like my revered mother, fighting to the last? Or crushed by the weight of all these events, alive but dead inside?

There was a third choice, though. Had my mother never considered it? Another path lay before me, one she'd despise. I could thrive as a thrall, earn my power and place. My little power was the way forward.

I exhaled and nodded down the ladder to Loga.

"Come down," she said. I was close enough for her to grab me with a large-knuckled hand. A shiver ran through me as I remembered the giants smashing thralls. I was much smaller, fragile as a bird.

The other Veikal women shifted behind Loga. One hissed at me through bared teeth. Another smacked that woman's head so she whimpered. They weren't sure how to deal with me. I was a thrall, of course, but unlike any they'd ever managed. Behind them stood two other thralls, tiny compared to the Veikal and filthy like river rats. I divined them to be women. They carried buckets of water.

"Come down, priestess." Loga gave me the merest tilt of her head, her long-fingered hands splayed open.

I wasn't a priestess, but I'd reward her manner with obedience. That was the first and very necessary step to set up relations between myself and Syral's household. These brute women towered over me and always would. We had our fears of each other, and I had to use their fear of me. Their feelings were the key, as Hendar had said. My little power sought them out, skimming over every twitch, breath, irritation, hurt, and joy. Through those sensations, I could move to their minds.

A hierarchy of power surrounded Syral, asleep in her crib, and I must exploit it to survive. But always with discretion. Like a mouse. No, even smaller. A whisper.

Still in my costume, silver chains tinkling, I descended from the loft. They shoved each other to make room and watched me for

signs of power or the slightest threat.

Loga handed me a long wool tunic, rough with thick threads, and a new thrall token.

“Dress, priestess.” She grunted deeply. In time, I’d learn the nuances of Baikal and Veikal grunts, huffs, and barks.

They’d no intention of giving me privacy, so I undressed in front of them. I draped the silver chains across the folded white dress, expensive and out of place here, just like me. There was no time for the nostalgia raised by the dress, but I allowed myself a taste, recalling dancing in the goddess-light and Hendar laughing. I handed Loga Hendar’s metal token. She handed it off to another of the women, who cast it into the fire.

My new token, a simple square of burnished leather, sewn over a twine cord and signed with Syral’s brand, sat centered on my chest. The women seemed pleased that their master had captured me, even though it was Hendar who’d done the trapping. But I was their master’s now. The past didn’t matter. No gods in the past.

I moved then, and one of them hissed at me. Another’s eyes opened wide, her thick brows rising. The thudding flow of their blood, the cadence of their breaths, their fear-braced guts, all of it told me that their next step would be to strike me. In their minds, death by axe was better than dying to a daemon. They may not be as big as Baikal, but they had large, powerful hands and arms. They were just as deadly to me. Had I been a foolish child, I’d scare them with a face or sound, or I would have laughed at them. But I’d never act like a child again.

Loga stood before Syral’s section of the hut, by a beam holding up the roof, and hung my token’s twin from a nail.

And just in case any of the women needed a reminder, she reminded them all: “This daemon, this priestess of the Dark

Goddess, belongs to Syral of the Zelaugr. She has no price. None can repay her. Not even a breath will touch her.”

Hands on hips, Loga waited for their submission.

They nodded and grunted, but there was also more hissing, more murmuring. Whoever touched me, even breathed on me, could give up her life.

“Get to work, then!” Loga boomed.

The women moved, all too quick for their size. Hugging myself as they moved about, pushing and shoving things, I urged the goddess not to defend me with shadows. Cups rattled on the table as the floor shook.

The goddess heard me. I stood fragile as a reed, not a wisp of Dark between me and these women. I was grateful, but maybe she *had* forsaken me. I couldn't tell. Contrary, battling thoughts plagued me.

Loga watched the others move about. They never came within a hand-span of me. Satisfied, she pulled back the flap to Syral's section. Within it sat a Veikal crone mending clothes. Beside her was Syral's crib.

I received no orders or direction, so I climbed back into the loft, my new cage. I settled in, making a bed and a sitting place from which to observe the chief's hearth yard.

Later in the day, a woman slid a bowl of mash onto the loft.

At night, they gathered around the hearth, eating and talking. I prepared to go down, but Loga frowned at me. Another hissed. That woman had found herself a bundle of lavender and waved it between us, hoping it would ward her. They tempted me to smirk, to react, but I remained, like my mother before me, stone-faced. *Show them nothing of what lives within you—not until you will it, until the goddess demands it.* My mother still had much to teach me.

I sat back in the loft's shadows, seeking them all out with my little power. They'd not invite me to sit with them, so I remained above, watching, and listening.

Learning.

Practicing.

The next day at dawn, more shamans arrived in the chief's yard. These shamans dressed in furs, claw necklaces, and animal bone ornaments. Veikal and thrall alike scurried about, making ready and lighting the fires.

The chief must have been deep in sleep because he stumbled out of his hut and slumped down on the porch's throne, a wide ironwood log molded by his backside and years of sitting. His train of women followed, wrapped in sheepskins and hides. He waved them off as they fussed over him.

A clutch of Veikal women emerged from the hut across from mine, bearing Syral's twin, Yorl. I'd heard the women of Syral's household talking about him like he was twenty feet tall. The chief's heart throbbed harder, so pleased he was to see his boy, already the favorite. Yorl was a hefty baby—at least thrice the size of a Yatani's. His screaming red face blazed from a field of creamy white sheepskin.

Syral was still in her crib. The ancient nanny rocked beside her. They'd no intention of presenting her at this gathering.

The chief raised his hand to Yorl. Why had he forgotten about his daughter already? She too would sit the rise, be a chief. I hadn't

seen Syral up close since that night in the chief's presence, but I felt a need to defend her, to protest her ill-treatment. I set an intention in myself to understand this chief.

My little power focused on him.

I didn't like what I found.

Like me, Syral was a tool. Yorl must sit the rise even if it meant submitting to the shamans' declarations. That was the only way. His father was not chief except by a thin thread of power he held over the Zelaugr. He wanted something more. A bloodline. A destiny. As the last of my house, a matron of none, I understood his feelings, but I despised him, too. A little rage welled in me on Syral's behalf.

More shamans arrived, including those of the hill with their blue bone garments. All the shamans had auras; all were vessels of a god. Even I could see that much. Fine threads of power danced around them, grasping and coiling. These were the low powers. My mother had taught me they were the easiest to see and use. Easy for *her*, perhaps. They flickered in and out of my view. *Young eyes see too much*, my mother had told me one day. Someday these lower power threads would disappear, no longer of interest to me. Not when the Dark beckoned.

I picked out Rigir and the senior shaman named Raurim, the one who'd declared the twins' fate. Shamans of the hill seemed the most Baikal to me. *Hill* was the wrong word. I sensed they meant something different, but the word that came to me was *hill*.

As the sun rose higher, the chief's people arrived for their breakfast. Everyone was eager to partake of the chief's bounty. I recalled Hendar's joy, the pride he'd felt over being readmitted to the tribe's favor. The smile faded from my lips as Raurim raised his hand to silence them all. He motioned the shamans forward so they formed a line in front of the porch.

One by one, each shaman stepped up to the chief's porch and spoke to the packed yard of witnesses. Each proclaimed the truth spoken the night of my gifting. They, too, had walked the god-lands and spoken to their ancestors.

Their companions chanted responses in deep, lilting drawls.

Murmurs rose as a deep thrum of voices. I shivered as the sea of sensations buffeted me. I'd need to practice much more to tease their feelings apart. Only the chief seemed clearer to read. His voice boomed across the yard.

"Tell them, brothers, speakers for the gods!" His voice filled the yard, and all turned to him. "Tell them what befalls the idiot that so much as spits on her!"

Melka's elder shaman, dressed in green vines, branches sticking out of his garb, acknowledged the chief in a long, whining whisper of a voice.

"Darkness! Darkness so deep, so foul!" He rattled as he spoke, his ancient body twitching as if he needed all his strength to utter even a word. "Melka will strike you dumb as a stump, drooling, blood flowing from your nose like a waterfall. And then dead! Without an axe or hammer! Felled by the wood spirits!"

Rage built up in the crowd. It all sounded awful, but I understood the shaman's words because I'd walked with the goddess, even if only for seconds at a time.

The shaman dressed in furs with dozens of claws dangling from his chest, arms, and waist stepped forward.

"And then the spears will come!" Even around his legs, tiny claws clapped as he moved. "Black as night! Stars blazing in their eyes! I have seen them spilling out of those black gates on shadow steeds with black spears that cut clean through ironwood!"

The crowd didn't seem convinced. My mother had told me stories of conquest, but those events had happened so long ago. From what she'd said, the Mornae preferred to keep to themselves crafting *kith* into mighty towers, shaping *kithaun* into wondrous devices, and growing things in barren places.

The crowd growled and grunted, gripping their weapons in massive fists. My own fists closed, and my tiny muscles hardened like theirs. I felt their strength like it was my own. It would have displeased my mother.

I sighed. It was too much for me. I relaxed my hands, breathing in and out, settling myself. And, with me, the crowd's rage settled. With each breath, I willed them to a short-lived peacefulness.

My mother had commanded me never to inflict peace with my power. People needed their rage, their hate, just to go on living. She'd owned a great store of it herself—a bitter anger reserved for those who had wronged her.

Raurim stepped forward to speak. A hush fell over the crowd.

"And then will come," he said, his voice deep but rattling, "the blue fire."

The rage shifted to fear.

"To consume all without mercy," he continued. The shamans instilled fear, and the elder of the hill excelled at it. His thick white brows furrowed; pale blue eyes squinted. "None here remember the terror that visited the Black Boar. The earth breaking. Heat boiling bones. Only I survived. Just a boy. There is nothing more terrible than a priestess of the Dark Goddess in battle. Barka keep us from such a fate."

Silence sat heavy on the crowd. The chief lumbered up from his seat. "You'll not touch this treasure of *mine* or harm it in any way! If

she remains unharmed, the Dark Goddess will pass over us in silence and not destroy us.”

Raurim flinched at the word *mine*, but said nothing. Oracles were very precise, exacting. Not as eloquent, but effective. The assembled Baikal feared the gods, and the Dark Goddess most of all.

“Because I tell you, brothers, if any of you harm a *single* hair—” The chief’s voice quavered, just enough. “I’ll not see Rothmin’s line ended by you lot.”

Hendar and his son bore away the truth of my capture with them. What stories might he have told them? The more fantastical, the better. These Baikal didn’t know that a curse already hung over them.

Raurim and Rigir glanced toward my loft. They must have known I watched. And as if to emphasize his point, Raurim called Barka, his god, filling the empty sky above the huts with crackling light. Rigir joined him, and the yard sizzled, then roared with thunderclaps, as if a sea storm had developed overhead. Raurim and Rigir looked my way, heads bowed, pale eyes staring. With a deafening last roar of thunder, their call ceased.

Baikal bearing the blue globes stomped the ground, full of their god’s power. The greatest of their gods, Barka. The chief nodded and patted the globes and jewels draped across his own chest. Chunky, lightless gems adorned his fingers.

I, too, needed his plan to work. The mass of giants in the yard, their rage always simmering, was like tinder, and could ignite with dire consequences for all.

The chief was no fool, though. That very night, he used me to cement his plan. I dressed again in the costume with the silver chains hanging from my neck. They’d placed a log there for me to

stand on. I scrambled atop it. Two hulks at the foot of the porch shielded me from the crowd. I stood between their shoulders.

A sea of hideous faces grimaced at me. I did not look any giant in the eye. Instead, I fixed my gaze on a point beyond them, on a knot in a beam. They were agitated, but I blurred them out. For once, I stood taller than them.

The chief grunted for me to hurry up.

I did as he commanded without hesitation. Hands raised to my shoulders, I repeated the fate spoken by the shamans of the hill, forest, and beasts. Within the soft white garment, I trembled, but on the outside, I preserved a serene composure, just as I imagined my mother would have done. I wouldn't let them see my fear.

Cheers followed from those supporting the chief. He waved me away before the tide could turn and I left the hall. We all had a part in this ruse. He scoffed at the shamans' warnings. The chief had plans for me, even if Hendar had gifted me to his daughter.

Loga and the other women took me out at *vaizora*, surrounded by a gang of giants who were each over twelve feet tall—the chief's best warriors. They'd remain a distance away, heads bowed, not daring to meet the goddess-light.

I'd soak in the goddess's power, resting in her presence. But I made no call, spoke no words, and made no prayers. Loga ordered me to just stand there. Like a *kithaun* blade, spear, or ring, I absorbed the goddess-light.

Trosgan displayed me to impress his guests, rivals from other tribes, or even those within his own tribe who needed reminding. He'd call me priestess and revere me as if I was the Dark Goddess's living relic. I stood there, resplendent with goddess-light like an enchanted bauble. It worked because a Mornae was a creature of

legend to the Baikal. The Mornae had long ago instilled dread in the peoples of Vailassa.

Daemon, they whispered in the depths of their fear.

The chief just smiled, pleased.

At these gatherings, I stood to the left of the rise. Raurim and any other shamans in attendance stood on the right. He presented us to the sounds of horns, shamans with their tongues out like the grotesque carved statues brooding in the nearby woods, eyes wide so that all could witness the brightness of the god-presence. And me, with my priestess pose, a mockery of my ancestors. I did it to survive, which to me seemed more Mornae than whether I did it correctly. The chief, confident he had the most important gods' favor, leaned back and rubbed his gut.

We put on this farce for weeks as bands, clans, and tribes came to pay their respects.

The chief would nod at the shamans' proclamations and slam his fist down so that all understood his grave threat. Death awaited any that dared contradict the oracle, the fate spoken for the twins.

But in his hard skull, one name took precedence: Yorl.

Bloodied bones, feathers, and claws hung from the rafters above my loft. Like clusters of unruly stars, they swayed and spun above me. I named them in the Mornae way, even though they didn't seem to match any constellation I knew. Strange patterns and symbols painted by the shamans on the ceiling and beams lured me away into daydreams and fanciful thoughts. The charms tinkled in the heated air of the hut. The wards reminded everyone of the chief's command.

Even with all the moots and assemblies, not everyone accepted the god-words.

I didn't need shaman wards to know that.

Since I'd arrived, my little power sought out every breath, every beating heart nearby, and sometimes more distant. Fear burrowed into the Baikal and Veikal. Fear over the twins' birth, a strange omen, and then my capture stirred their minds with terrors from ancient legends and tales. They were a superstitious people who saw signs and portents in every little thing. The shamans and chief seemed pleased to stoke that fire, but also to control it to their advantage.

At *vaizora*, the fear was suffocating. But when the goddess passed over the village and departed without leaving a mark, the

Baikal regained their courage. The shamans hung more wards, this time at the entrance to the hut.

The thralls, of which there were dozens upon dozens, also overwhelmed me with their soft weeping or desperate cries. And more than that, the silent cries, the secret ones that shivered and trembled within them. They burdened me with their terror and loss.

Make of your mind a fortress, my mother had taught me. It was not my mind that pained me, though. It was my heart. She would have scoffed at that, even though I knew the depths of her own pain. She'd dressed hers in strength. That was the Mornae way.

Horror and suffering buffeted my young, tender feelings day and night, waking or dreaming. The steady creep of emotion, an unrelenting torrent rumbling through bodies of all shapes and sizes, demanded my attention.

I needed relief.

I found it with Syral.

Since the day I had set our fates together, I'd longed to be near her. I could not explain why. It was a compulsion. I'd fathomed something there, and like a moth to fire, I sought it out.

From the loft, I watched them care for her, but her minders shielded her from prying eyes. Nothing could keep me from her voice, though. She cried loud and full, and sent the women into a frenzy to quiet her.

One night, Syral's caretakers deep in sleep and snoring, I crept down the ladder and snuck through the heavy hide curtains separating Syral from the rest of us. The crone, Runa, said nothing. Even when I crept up close to Syral's crib, Runa didn't stir from her post. She sucked her gums under a swollen knob of a nose. Her eyes were two tiny black pebbles buried in folds of skin. She was tying off bunches of dried herbs, and her large, gnarled hands

struggled with the twine. I felt inclined to help her, but resisted. I could trust no one. She might appear like an oversized Yatani ancient, but there was the Veikal rage in her, hot and unhappy.

I moved to the crib—it was a small cage, but open on top. Above it swirled more charms, not bloodied, but polished bright, with droplets of silver like rain, and other precious stones bound up in rabbit hide cords. Syral fixated on them until I was close. Then, her gaze followed me as I moved about the crib to the head.

Her face crinkled up to scream, demanding to see me. I smiled at this.

I believed then that being near her was the safest place to be. Still, I kept myself well out of her reach. Syral grasped in vain for me, her fingers brushing the crib's bars. Her dark eyes looked about, trying to understand. When she couldn't see me, she punched and kicked at the air, tossing blankets and toys. I picked up a toy shaped like an animal, a bear or a wolf.

Runa grumbled. "She has the fury of sea *and* sky in her. Best beware."

Not that Syral's brother was any calmer. The thralls whispered about Yorl. He'd demolished three cribs already and killed a thrall who'd gotten too close. To the Veikal minders, this behavior seemed normal.

I ignored all talk of how dangerous they were. Syral and I were different. I reached in and placed my hand on her head, stroking her raven-black hair. I told myself she understood we were alone against the world. And so, once again, I ignored my mother's teaching. I poured myself out in the silence between us, sharing my deepest thoughts. They were only the thoughts of a child, trivial in their concerns, but Syral's brow furrowed as I relived my day for her. Not just my experiences, but also the secret things I knew through my

little power. I shared it all with her. I mouthed all that had happened, opening my heart and mind.

If she understood me at all, she didn't acknowledge it. She was just a baby, and I made use of her to unburden myself.

So began our relationship—not with bellows and stomps, chains or whips, but with tenderness. She was my captive.

The nanny grunted, reminding me of the time. Day was coming. I gave Syral one last pat on the head and snuck up to my loft.

The next day, Syral's screams filled the hut from top to bottom, and she shook in her crib. I crouched at the top of the ladder, watching her minders trip over each other, barking orders, shoving, and pushing. Only old Runa remained calm, rocking and working on her mending. She must have been deaf.

I descended and shook the little rattle they'd given me to announce my presence—like the one the shamans used, but tiny and with down feathers strung about it.

They stepped aside, and I approached the crib, like magic, Syral stilled, kicking more gently, searching for me. I stood by her head and laid my hand on her.

One woman snorted, but Loga smacked her in the face. Runa stared at me. I think she must have suspected my power. She went back to mending a pair of hide leggings.

I patted Syral's head, and the women watched, wide-eyed, except for Loga. She was calculating what it meant that I could do this. She'd report it to the chief, I knew.

Veikal obsessed over their wants like a wolf its prey.

They'd rather be serving Yorl, the future chief, and not this girl, this daughter of a goddess they didn't understand. There were no shamans to explain Aelath's will. The wind, the sky, the invisible... nothing else governed so much of their lives. There was nothing that

Aelath didn't touch. Sayin was her husband, Vai her sister, and Barka her lover, and yet, none governed her.

So was Syral, shaking the crib. Not that Yorl was any different, but what mattered was how the Baikal perceived and interpreted Syral's actions. His, they lauded; hers, they feared.

I didn't understand. Among my people, I thought she would have been a matron. My mother would have derided me for even thinking about it. What likeness could the Mornae have to these raging hulks?

I spent my days thus, either acting the priestess for the chief or sitting with the nanny by Syral's crib. When the women took her out, they sent me to my loft, closing the hide drapes so that I couldn't see. They'd not take any chances.

I didn't need to see her, though. From my perch on the loft, I soothed Syral.

My mother would have hated this. Even then, with her gone, I chafed at the strictures of her teaching.

It was too late anyway. Fate bound us as tight as Veikal bindings.

It wasn't long before things changed for me again.

Baikal grew at an astonishing rate, and Syral was sitting up in a month, wanting to stand. She struggled—furious—against the weakness in her legs. It wouldn't be long before she stood, then moved.

One night, as I sat by Runa embroidering cloth in the Veikal style, Syral grasped a wooden toy and squeezed it until it shattered. The splinters pricked her skin. Blood sprayed her bedding. Her chubby hands grasped the bars of the crib.

My heart sank.

Runa shooed me away. I clambered up the ladder and sat at the edge of the loft while she wiped Syral down. Runa muttered to herself and removed the soiled linens. Syral's little wounds had already closed. That was a giant's power. I'd seen it with Hendar and even with the black-haired giant who had killed my mother. Baikal skin was thick, their muscles like iron. The power of Barka coursed through them as the Dark through me.

I'd allowed myself to think we'd have time to grow together, even be friends. A folly. Another of my childish mistakes. My mother and Hendar had tried to teach me, but I'd rushed headlong into traps of

my making, my feelings leading the way. They'd not let me touch her again. Once a giant tasted its strength, its power, it was best to stand apart.

The next day, Loga ordered me to gather my things. They were few, but I'd already collected trinkets and the things a child makes to pass the time. *Never be idle in your thoughts or hands*, my mother would say. *Abide in the goddess-presence*.

Loga waited for me. I'd obey her order in good time. I didn't rush, but moved with the intention and dignity of my people. It was all I had left.

I descended with a bundle, my trinkets hidden within.

She grunted at me. "The shamans will take down their wards," Loga said to Vilki, one of my master's other caretakers.

I followed Loga through the warren of tunnels to another chamber made up of alcoves and rough shelves. Bear, wolf, and fox furs, deer and rabbit hides, folds of wool both crude and fine, were all stacked high. In one alcove there was a stool, a small table, and a pile of bedding fleece. There was no fire. They must have realized I didn't need it. Shaman charms and wards already hung from the rafters—rows and rows of them—and around the lintel, they'd made marks in blood.

There were still doubters.

But my performances must have been helping the chief. He treated me well, keeping me comfortable. He never bound me, never caged me—as far as I could tell, nothing barred me from stepping outside that door.

What need was there to lock it? Where would I go? People would fear me, and I was only a child, accustomed to care and protection. In Mornae fashion, my mother had kept me well hidden. I'd learned to live in small spaces, interacting only with her. Mornae children are

never safe before their naming, she'd said. A daughter, especially an heiress, was the most precious thing to a Mornae house. Other houses often tried to kill them, sending assassins wrapped in shadows. I'd never understood this, but she'd said it was true. *Jealousy. Revenge. Ambition.* Such things simmered deep within their powerful minds. She seemed to know much about it, but I never pressed her to tell me more. She became something different when she thought about her past. As a small child, her talk filled me with dread. I'd thought every shadow in our little house was an assassin.

In my new home, I worried about other shadows—huge, lumbering ones. I tried not to flinch at their movements. I struggled never to be under a giant's shadow, an impossible ambition. They crowded me like a forest of ironwoods. I resolved to master myself, even if the world blazed around me. I imagined myself made of stone, a statue.

In the storeroom, I made perches atop the stacks of hides. Through the slats, I observed the village.

As a Mornae, I welcomed the long stretches of quiet and stillness. I rested and lost myself for days at a time, either deep in my thoughts and memories, or observing the villagers. And sometimes, when I was still, the invisible threads of lesser power manifested to me. They seemed so close and real, but when I grasped at them, they would bend away, refusing my touch. I was not skilled enough, but it was my prerogative and my destiny to touch the deepest of them. People called it the Dark. *Zaeress*, my mother had called it.

During these times of profound quiet, my power unfurled and sought anything to cling to. I stretched inside, opening wide. If I didn't anchor myself somehow, I'd dissolve, and yet it was only a

sensation, growing in power but also acuity. Once I overcame the fear of it, I could use it.

When my power returned to me like a sea tide, it was just me there, lying on a fleece in my very own skin—my bones joined by muscle and sinew, blanketed in gray skin. My breath seemed like a rumbling sea until it became a hissing whisper.

The storeroom no longer seemed so awful.

I settled in, safe and comfortable.

From one of my perches atop Trosgan's furs, I discovered a new source of suffering.

Under the storeroom's east vent was an open yard with a multitude of pens. Longhouses formed a square around the yard. Every week of summer and into early autumn meant a steady stream of thralls went passing through the sorting yard.

My mother said Mornae had no need to rule others, though they could if they chose to. When she'd spoken like that, I'd frowned, which had only made her stern. But the things she'd told me hadn't always made sense. My people seemed aloof, superior, wielders of incredible power, but also as cruel, violent, and petty as any giant. It seemed to me they didn't keep thralls because of a superior sensibility, but because they'd be an inconvenience. Nothing distracted them from their quest for the Dark.

Glued to the vent, my window on the world, I watched a new train of thralls enter the yard. My hands cramped from the strain. I squinted, as if that would protect me from what was happening below.

The thralls were all men. Not Yatani, but of other tribes. All had their hair hacked off, their heads sometimes scabbed over where the

Veikal had cut too roughly. The giants yoked three or four men from different tribes together and forced them to occupy the same space with a mortal enemy, but they had a worse enemy in the Veikal.

Links of thick, hardened rope, same as the rope the giants had thrown at my mother, bound them. Veikal made that rope. It took a powerful hand to cut it, and I was certain it held power. The more the thralls struggled, the more tightly the shackles constricted.

One thrall screamed as his bonds cut off the blood to his hands, turning them white. I couldn't stop watching.

Stop struggling! I wanted to scream at them. My own hands went numb. *Stop! Stop!* I thought that by thinking my words, the man could hear, but my gift didn't work so easily.

It was too late. A massive iron fist squashed the man to the ground. The body wriggled and flapped. One man bound to the corpse fainted. Another shook with terror, a scream building in him.

I tried to assuage this man's fear, but it was horrible. The uncontrollable shaking, the sweat, the piss running down his leg, his bowels ready to let loose what little they contained.... I abhorred it all, but his feelings flooded through me regardless.

My body went numb as the giant kicked him across the yard. The rest of the thralls towed behind. The thralls vexed the giant. Managing them was new to him.

Any movement in the remaining thralls ratcheted the giant's rage higher. Just as the shadows rose about me when threatened, so a giant's rage sloshed about in his great body, wanting to rise and cause mayhem.

I fainted as the rampaging giant began crushing the rest of the thralls.

When I came to, other giants were in the yard bellowing at the one who'd killed and maimed all those men. They walloped the

perpetrator of the “theft”, a foolish mistake to leave him in charge. Someone would have to answer for it to the chief.

Dread seized me. What kind of giant would Syral be? What violence would she perpetrate on me, her thralls, and her Veikal? They all feared her for a reason. Thinking about it, I regretted being her thrall. This was not a sane place. Fate had cast me down from the heights of favor and knowledge to a hateful oblivion.

Mother had been right in wanting me dead.

Hendar's kindness to me was a mistake. He'd made me think I was something more than a thrall. Special, a treasure. It only made my captivity worse.

Every day, alone in that storeroom, dark, sad thoughts burdened me. My body trembled with exhaustion, but I would not let myself weep. Heavy steps in the hallway froze me. Surrounded by Trosgan's treasures, I languished. Even though I stopped looking through the eastern perch, the screams of thralls invaded the room. Their suffering became a lullaby to me, filling me so that I had no escape.

I tried to imagine myself running, running toward the hazy gray line on the far horizon. Could it be the mountains where my people had built their wonders?

The echo of my mother's suffering swelled in me. I could never go there.

I buried my face in the soft fleece, opening my mouth to scream, but there was only silence. Too many cages held me, layer upon layer. Hendar should have let me die. The battle at the niche felt so long ago, and I was already another person.

As much as I tried to stop it, my little power raked others into me. I fainted often from the burden of their misery. Sometimes when I

woke, I'd forgotten who I was until I raised my gray hands and recalled myself. I'd pass out for hours at a time.

When I was awake, I stared up at the charms dangling above me and endeavored to still my heart.

I'd made this choice, and I was already faltering.

This was *my* great war, *my* legendary quest. There was nothing noble or beautiful about it. There was nothing else for me but survival.

I stirred, my mouth and throat a dry cave.

“You will eat,” Loga said in Baikal. She tempered the usual bark and bellow of Baikal speech, like she was keeping them chained in her throat.

I sat up and looked down from the north perch. She scowled at me, but said nothing more. I was sitting atop a pile of priceless red wolf pelts.

A thrall slipped around her and replaced my food. They brought me food every day and replaced my waste bucket. Keeping me penned up in this room seemed best to them. After witnessing the horror of the thrall yard, I agreed. I wasn’t yet ready for what lay outside.

Loga inspected my still full bucket of food from the day before, the soup long chilled and gelled.

“You *will* eat.”

She scratched her head, the thin hairs breaking free of the ties. A dilemma faced her. She fed me fresh food every day to honor my goddess, but she loathed throwing out food.

“Take out the soup,” she ordered the thrall. “Leave the rest.”

The thrall trembled as I made my way down to them. She removed the soup with quaking hands and made presentable what remained. As I neared her, she started huffing, blowing away at the air around her as if I brought evil with my presence. Bruises marked her arms. Jaw crooked. Nose smashed. She wheezed every breath.

“Go!” Loga ordered her, and the thrall ran out, buckets in each hand. The heft of them strained the thrall’s left shoulder. I shuddered as the pinching, tearing pain rippled through me. She was trying so hard, but kept making mistakes. I didn’t think she’d survive.

“Eat. *Now.*”

I sat down by the food bucket and removed the soup, setting it aside, and pecked at the berries.

Loga grunted and held out a bundle of cloth. “This is very important work.”

A piece of a tunic or apron they’d taken from a raid sat atop the bundle. It wasn’t a familiar design, not Mornae or Yatani. Flowers and vines locked together in knots at the corners and splayed out across the hem. It was intricate, and far too fine a design for large Veikal hands.

Underneath the sample was a fold of rare cloth. Not coarse like Veikal weave, more like the weave Hendar had used for my costume.

“Make this,” Loga ordered me.

I nodded.

“Do this.”

She made a motion over the cloth like she was petting it. I recalled my mother doing something similar, to imbue cloth or thread with her intention, the accumulated *zaerness* within her.

“Trosgan commands it.” The words stuttered out of her. Anger seethed in her breast. She belonged to Syral now, and resented the

chief's meddling.

I repeated the action, running two fingers over the cloth, mimicking my mother's technique, and this pleased Loga.

No *zaeress* went out from me, however. My mother hadn't taught me how to do that. Such work was for senior acolytes and priestesses, women with deep stores of power. I was a misshapen, stunted vessel, fired far too early. I also felt broken inside from so many unpleasant experiences. The slightest emotion around me seemed to drag me along with it. I was no better than a raging Baikal.

Loga didn't seem to know if my action worked. If I moved my fingers over the cloth, she nodded and grunted her approval.

She left me there with a pile of cloth, thread, and bone needles.

The next day, the thrall came alone to switch out my buckets, leaving more cloth. I wanted to speak with her, but she scurried away as soon as I opened my mouth.

Three days later, Loga, two other Veikal women, and a band of the chief's warriors took me out to see my goddess. We climbed a nearby rocky outcropping. There was an unobstructed view of the sky.

I sat on the rock appointed as my altar and soaked in the goddess-light from the faintest hint of her dawning until the goddess passed over the edge of the world in the northeast, unto Sayin's dawning. The world chased her, but when Sayin dawned, she'd gone.

Under her gaze, I couldn't help but consider my life thus far. What did the goddess intend for me? So close, it seemed she was throbbing, as if she would speak to me. The earth beneath me shifted and shook in response to her passing. Only a Mornae could have sensed it.

I let the shadows rise from my feet and hands, called forth without my knowing how; like thought, or a word, or a breath.

Loga and the women covered their faces. The Baikal warriors grunted and turned away. They must have been the chief's best because they never acted out their fear-induced rage.

I didn't care about their fear in those moments.

Shadows whipped about my fingers, but as soon as I felt a hot itch in my nose, blood threatened to break free and run down my face. I wanted to press on, to pursue the goddess through the winding Dark. If the goddess took my life, that was my fate. I could accept that. But the giants would react badly, so I stopped.

I touched my nose and made sure it was unbloodied. Hendar had welcomed it as a sign of my goddess's favor, but I didn't trust any of these Baikal or Veikal to understand. They would never take a bloody nose as a good sign.

My dirty, unkempt hair glimmered in response to the goddess-light. My mother's hair had been a cascade of silvery white. I ached to remember her loveliness and how it had masked something deep and terrible; a bitter anger that always threatened to erupt. I wanted my mother's anger to seize me, to possess me with her strength, but I remained myself.

They always walked me straight back to the storeroom through tunnels, forcing aside anyone who stood in the way. Thralls scattered, both from the giants and from me. We were both creatures of nightmare to these thralls.

Even though I could quiet her, they didn't let me near Syral. They feared her and what she might do to me. A female Baikal hadn't been born in so long and was still a strange creature to them.

I heeded Hendar's every warning. I could not trust these giants in the least. They were gruff and careless in their vast movements. The

Baikal cared nothing for smaller things. I walked on grass and ants and kicked at the smaller things of the world. Just so, Baikal kicked at and stepped on things beneath them. If they harmed me, they might scream and roar, weep and beat their chests, but I would be dead all the same.

Thus began my time amongst the Baikal. My time with Hendar had been a dream, a long-passed paradise.

I n my fifth year among the Baikal, they took me down to the thrall yard.

I'd heard them scrubbing the yard down, stacking the cages, tossing the small ones about and shoving at the bigger ones to clean around them. Empty cages and pens of all sizes stood stacked or pushed against the sides of the yard.

The Baikal didn't raid in winter, so it was empty. The Mornae also rested in winter.

Still, a stench of sweat and flesh assailed me.

Vilki and Dormu pulled out a medium-sized pen, the top of it reaching my shoulder. Chin lifted, I glanced at Loga.

She said nothing, but ushered me into the too-short cage, forcing me to bend my head. Loga didn't meet my gaze. I'd often reminded myself not to trust anyone, but I had. This was my reward.

All but Vilki snickered.

A new Veikal woman I hadn't met before hissed and stomped a foot at me. She was less bulky than the others. Her skin was pale, her hair a sandy brown. I didn't have time to find out more. I dared not risk it.

The blood of so many damaged thralls mottled the yard's walls and stone floor like massive bruises. Heaps of rope and shackles sat in the corner, writhing like snakes.

Syral entered, guided by two of the chief's women.

I crouched, keeping my balance by grasping the cage bars. My nails dug into the waxy substance used to make the shackles and binds. Twisting hemp ground in my ears. The magic of the Veikal imbued the twine binding the bars together.

The chief-mates looked at me and sneered. They wore my handiwork, the curve of my goddess in black thread peeking out behind the shapes of meadow flowers adorning the hems of their dresses.

Syral didn't seem to remember me. Nose crinkled, she scanned the yard. They'd pulled her hair back in a tie, but strands of it were loose and her face was dirty. A welt crossed her left cheek. She'd been wrestling.

The taller of the two chief-mates took a step toward my cage. "You can never sit the rise until you control the daemon, girl."

Syral grunted in response. My heart dipped. She didn't want me.

The other chief-mate nodded. She slouched and kept her head low, the less important of the two. "It is your birthright, Aelaku."

"Get on with it, girl," the first woman said, tone short. She didn't touch Syral, though.

Syral surged toward me, surprising everyone. Loga flinched, but I didn't. I knew she was coming for me. She gripped the bars of my cage, tilting it up and taking the full measure of me. I remained still, gripping the top of the cage to keep myself from falling backward. I wouldn't let her shake me. Syral was five and I was fourteen, but she already looked like a giant. Her hands were thicker than mine, like those of a large, powerful man. Her dark eyes, still small and hidden

under a furrowed brow, gave no sign of either pleasure or displeasure. She twisted the bars. The twine and rope holding it all together hissed and creaked.

I kept my composure, but my power crept out, seeking knowledge. It searched the chief's women. Like the other Veikal, they bore no protection against my intrusion, but I had to be careful and not lose myself. My mother had warned me to not let my gift spill out in all directions, and me with it.

I needed to keep my wits. There was no time for pride as I stormed their bodies in secret. Their limbs were tight, eager to strike me, but terrified to do so. The animosity between them, the competition for the chief's favor, dominated their feelings. I dared to risk knowing more. The surface of their minds brimmed with Veikal anger... not the rage of their larger kin, but the disappointment and disgust of their middle position. A god's mistake.

They expected Syral to reject me. They wanted her to destroy me, even though I served the chief's plan. Even after five years, they were still not in favor of it. More than that, they despised Syral for being everything they could not be. Their weakness and fear threatened to overwhelm me. I blinked and turned my attention back to Syral.

One of the chief's women grunted at her, urging her to shake the cage, to break it, hoping Syral would break me as well.

The girl just stared at me. Unlike the chief's women and the Baikal I knew, her rage was all tamped down inside, as if she knew everyone was expecting her to frenzy. But she was more like me, like my people: silent as the stillest night.

The cage creaked under the growing pressure. Her young muscles twitched and tightened. I didn't move. I wouldn't give her a

reason to rage. She could tear the cage apart if she willed it. We both knew she could.

As a Mornae's growth is within, in their capacity for the Dark—the body being a sign only—so the Baikal's power is manifest in their bodies. Other tribes couldn't reach such heights and strength. My little power wanted to seek her out, but like with Rigir, I suspected she would be keener to perceive me.

The chief's women slapped the cage and it shuddered. I centered myself deep within, calming my body. They wanted me to react. They wanted the protective shadows to rise and enrage their charge.

Syral kept her eyes on me. With each smack of the cage, her face contorted with a controlled grimace. Her knuckles turned white, and the wood yielded, molded by her fingers. The more she squeezed, the more she glared, and the more my gift sought her.

Wood fibers snapped, tearing within the ash bars. The women howled with pleasure.

"Come on, girl!" the head woman said.

I thought for sure the *girl* would tear her to bits at any moment.

We just stared at each other, fixated. I remained on the edges, exploring the twitch and tingle of her body. There was, even then, a great power in her. I held a breath as I perceived the beginnings of a strike deep in her arms, her legs tightening to brace for the blow. She intended to strike a chief-mate.

She blinked twice, and the rage eased, dropping away as quickly as it had risen. She released the cage with a thud, and I crumpled inside it. Her interest shifted to the rough and tumble of the chief's yard, where the Baikal boys wrestled and beat on each other.

I sat back in the cage and exhaled, trembling.

Runa cackled behind me, amused at my predicament.

Months passed like this. They'd put me in a cage—one I could only sit in—near where Syral spent her time. At first, they just meant to humiliate me by having me in the short cage, but in the end, it was mere laziness.

An understanding developed between me and the child master. She lost interest in breaking the cage open, and so the chief-mates' fun ended. Instead, she played in the main yard where Yorl remained undefeated. It didn't look like play, though, the way she and her twin wrestled. I was certain one of them would end up dead, but they seemed impervious to damage—*permanent* damage, at least. There were always bruises, popping joints, and broken fingers.

Their strength was astonishing. It was like their bodies already held the rage of a Baikal adult. Someday, their bodies would match that rage.

Other Baikal boys joined in, but they were most interested in beating Yorl. Syral struggled to get their attention and show them her own strength. My heart ached for her. Like an older sister, I wanted her to succeed, as strange as she was to me.

Yorl glared at me, jealous that his sister had such a prize. He didn't have the chief's face, and was more handsome than the other boys, but he had the same blue eyes and stern gaze, the black hair and pale skin. *Like the giant who'd killed my mother*, I thought. He'd be a brute like him, too. The boys fawned on him, and he pummeled them, but unlike Syral's elusive mind, Yorl's was clear to me.

Like the chief, he planned to claim me as his own—once he sat the rise, that is. He gave no thought to the sister who would sit beside him. She, too, was just a relic. In five short years, his caretakers had filled his mind with all kinds of nonsense. These

same shamans who proclaimed Syral's greatness told him *he'd* be the one to rule. They just needed Yorl to grow in strength and prowess, and the Baikal would follow. They would forget his sister by then, the omen forgotten, fulfilling her true purpose to mother children for the Baikal.

I kept all these things to myself. What could I say? It would be mere gossip, and worst of all, speaking of it would reveal my secret, my little power which kept me protected.

And who could I tell? I feared Syral as everyone else did.

The next spring, after a long, damp winter, Loga told me to gather my things. I left the storeroom as I'd found it. Part of me was glad to leave, but the other part felt death nearing.

Be like stone. Let the blue fire burn. I will not flinch.

She led me to another cage in the yard. I held my head high before entering, and once inside, crouched down. They didn't like this, but I wouldn't budge.

The chief's new women—the others had died of a fever that had swept through the Veikal the previous winter—loomed over my cage.

Syral had grown as tall as Loga, but was thicker. One of the chief's women placed a large brown egg in her hand. They grunted at her, and she closed her hand around it; her fist was the size of my head. The bits and pieces of egg squirted from the sides of her hand. Orange and white slime trickled down the bars of my cage. The women barked and snarled at her.

Syral's brow furrowed. She'd taken no pleasure in destroying the egg.

When they placed the next egg in her hand, she concentrated. It was important to her that she succeed in this test. Her eyes flickered. A calculating mind grew along with the bone and muscle.

A chill ran through me as the shell cracked. Syral's lip curled upward. She held out her other hand, demanding another egg. The next one suffered no injury.

I could not express her feelings in words. It was like she had conquered an age-old enemy. All she had done was spare an egg.

It was only the first step, though. Even then, she knew her destiny. Thralls brought in small animals. My stomach churned as I realized the progression led to me. Heat rose to my knees from deep below the ground. Shadows would rise to defend me, but they mustn't.

A red and green rooster sat like a sparrow in Syral's hands. None dared breathe as it settled there.

"Hold it!" the chief's woman said.

Syral ignored her, stubborn as a Baikal.

It was the rooster who sealed his own fate. He grew impatient. His wings flapped, his feet grasped at Syral's fingers. This was not an egg with smooth, clear boundaries.

I looked away, not wanting to witness the gore. Bones popped and cracked. A long screech filled the hut.

The chief-mates made a ruckus over Syral's failure. They scolded her, but never laid a hand on her. I remained still and imbibed the torrent of emotion. It was wrong of them to treat her this way. *Very* wrong. A still, bitter anger was building, solidifying in the child's gut.

More birds followed, along with other animals.

I didn't understand why I had to witness this ritual. Even now, the truth chills me.

Like all of them, I stared, heart in my throat, at the trapped hare, its body pressing with rapid breaths against Syral's hands. It squirmed, brown and white fur bulging between her fingers.

"Witness!" the chief's woman yelled at me.

I made the pose with dignity and seriousness. The Veikal smiled, proud they'd forced the Dark Goddess to acknowledge one of their own. Syral gave me a sidelong glance, unimpressed.

Then it was my turn.

They opened the cage.

I was coming into my growth. A thin, willowy reed compared to her. As a Baikal, Syral had begun her growth earlier than I'd expected, and had already gained a foot on me. A child—if you could call her that—of six years, but already taller and heavier than me.

She just frowned as her meaty hands gripped my arms.

The chief's women barked at her again. I kept a serene gaze fixed on Syral, as I imagined my mother would in my place. I met pride with pride. My only thought was to keep all notion of threat at bay. I must not let the shadows rise and cause her to rage.

I don't think owning me pleased her. I kept a fair distance from her thoughts. She lifted me once, and I thought my bones would snap, then she set me back down and released me. It hurt, but I kept my gaze averted and my jaw clenched. *Like a stone.*

"Do it again, Aelaku!" The chief's woman called her by the honorific, Breath of Aela, but with disdain. These women, too, supported Yorl.

Syral clenched her fists.

The woman barked at her again to repeat the action. Veikal hatred can be worse than Baikal rage.

Syral was frowning, her fists curled tight. Blood rushed into her arms. Her skin stretched. I prepared to step backward. She was taking the measure of the women, deciding which to strike. They were still taller than her and favored by the chief. I feared for them more than myself, though. She resisted being the thing they wanted

her to be. I didn't want to think she would hurt me. Our secret time together at her crib had deluded me.

"It's mine," she said. She glared at the woman, and I sweated under my tunic.

The other chief-mate handed Syral the twin to my thrall token. The cord dangled out from each side of her hand. She stared them down, and then gave me a sideways glance. That token would wrap her up in her father's plans for Yorl.

A chill ran through me. Even the chief's women hushed.

Syral left us there without a word and headed back to the yard. She stuffed the token into her belt.

Her touch echoed in my arms with a painful tingle. I learned the lesson she taught that day, and I was determined to never give her reason to put her hands on me. She wasn't rash. She'd only lay a hand on me for a reason.

After that day, I slept in a cot alongside her Veikal women. My master should have commanded me, but she didn't. I couldn't afford to wallow, even though her indifference pained me. Loga left the fine embroidery work for me to do. The chief's women favored my delicate stitches and paid my master for my work. I even learned how to make fine chains of silver and to fashion settings for jewels.

The chief must have ordered my master to wear the token, because it sat on Syral's chest after that day. The chief ruled Yorl. Yorl ruled my master. She ruled me. In the chief's mind, that's how it had to be.

But my master would challenge that claim every day from then on. And drag me along in her wake.

Five years passed.

I spent my days in the safety of my master's hut or on its porch—sitting by Loga, busy with the work of the household. I forgave Loga for her treatment of me. She had her own struggles. Fearful ones. Everyone around me was struggling, like thralls caught in ever-tightening bonds.

I embroidered the same few patterns day after day on cloth woven by thralls. I found it difficult to hold any grudge, always willing to give an excuse or reason, but that was a weakness of mine. My mother would have reminded me of my great heritage, so far above these people.

At my age, acolytes would have ushered me into the Temple at the center of Vaidolin. Sometimes, while sitting on the porch, I'd play out such a scene in my mind. I imagined a grand chamber filled with shadows, and high above me, atop the temple's spire, the little moon, a giant globe swirling with goddess-light. The purity and power of its light was a beacon to an exile like me. Outside the chamber, knights would hum, their deep voices reverberating through the walls. Incense would fill the space, sweet and strong at once. The acolytes—the loveliest women I could imagine, exemplars

of Mornae beauty—would wipe me down with sacred waters and present me to the leaders of our people. A high priestess would then declare my flesh sacred.

With my acolyte sisters, I would learn the mysteries of power until I was ready to make my priestess trial. Those years were the most crucial time for a Mornae woman. Without that preparation, time would pass, and the yearning heart would shrivel. Those first one hundred years were the gateway to the first millennia. Then the long cycles started, one after another, but only if a woman knew the goddess's ways.

Instead, now twenty years old, I was a thrall with no house, no people of my own. I served a child, but she already raced ahead of me in body and mind. My people's maturity took time and care. There was no one to understand me. I suffered in silence.

One day, my master's household sat on the porch in the summer heat, and I worked while the young Baikal played in the chief's yard. My master sat apart, aloof. The chief's warriors were teaching the boys to fight with weapons, and they'd lost all interest in fighting her. Their practice weapons smacked together, splintering as the boys discovered their power.

"You have no need!" the chief had blared at her in front of everyone. "You do not need to endure the hard training of a man. You are already sacred!"

She'd just frowned at him.

It made little sense to me or her, but he wouldn't budge. He denied her the same training as her brother to protect Yorl's claim to the rise. If anyone challenged her, killed her, then Yorl wouldn't sit the rise at all. The Baikal would see any defeat as an ill-omen, a sign that the gods did not favor the twins as the good omen the chief and shamans made them out to be.

Lenor, an old, fifteen-foot-tall Baikal, preparing to join those of the hill, dragged his body across the courtyard from the chief's porch to where my master sat. He used his war hammer as a staff, head down and thudding ahead of him like a third leg. He stood in front of her and cleared his throat.

"Aelaku," he said, "Chief Trosgan needs your trinket." The words rumbled in his chest.

My master glared at the boys. "I will train."

"Chief Trosgan will have guests after the next dark goddess's return. Important elders. You should have the daemon bathe in the goddess-light before that day."

He waited, leaning on his war hammer. Globes dangled from his harness and belt. Soon he'd learn the mysteries of their god to fill the globes of all their warriors with power. The chief had sent him to convince a child to hand over her greatest treasure, if only for a night.

That was the way of things with the Baikal. I belonged, by god-word of all shamans and the Dark Goddess, to my master. Anything I did was for her good only, so it was best not to force her, lest that good turn to evil for others.

"I *will* hunt."

Lenor peered up to the sky, reading there a secret word from the gods. "You may hunt. Small game."

Her brow furrowed. "Ten silver rings. One night."

Lenor huffed. "Chief Trosgan does not pay so much for even ten thralls."

She kept her gaze on the boys, watching each move, learning.

"Chief Trosgan will pay five silver rings," Lenor told her.

"Ten."

"This is unacceptable, Aelaku."

“What is?”

Yorl crashed into his opponent, sending a Veikal man to the ground with a resounding *thud*.

Lennor turned. The Veikal didn't move. Yorl grinned, raising his arms up. Lennor turned back to his task, left eye twitching with annoyance.

“Aelaku, seek your goddess's wisdom. Six rings is more than fair.”

“My goddess says ten.”

My master glanced at me, and I stood, hands at my chest and palms out. I turned my gaze up, as if the goddess was dawning above us. “The Dark Goddess demands ten.”

And that was it. Lennor's gaze hardened, but he couldn't speak against the two goddesses. “Ten it is. Have her ready.”

He shuddered back across the yard like an old tree. His limbs were ancient boughs swaying. He controlled the rage in him well, but it still sparked in his breast.

My master went back to observing the boys. I sat down.

This was how my life was. I said what they wanted, did what they wanted, and somehow lived to see another day. No one asked me what I thought, what I wondered, or what I hoped. Not even Loga, who seemed like a friend. I submitted as if it was the only option left to me. My mother had thought otherwise.

I had my little advantage, of course; the magic I possessed that none but Hendar and Rigir knew about. I used it as gently as I could, always watching for signs that my target suspected something. If my master knew of it, she never gave tell, but I didn't think she would tolerate me poking about. Like the Baikal rage, my little power often had a way of its own. It was like holding water in cupped hands or trying to grab hold of a slick piglet.

As before with Hendar, I let myself settle into the safety of this new life. I observed my master, my little power always on the fringe. Curiosity replaced whatever desire for escape I'd harbored, fleeting as it may have been. Something lingered in me, driving me forward to the place fate ordained. Despite my master's apparent aversion to me, I wanted to fulfil that destiny.

Days later, as agreed, I stood at the chief's moot. Baikal of different garb and markings paid him homage. Trosgan's was an ancient line; respected, but only so much. He was demanding submission to his leadership. He wanted more than to rule a band, even a tribe of Baikal. Under his rule, the Black Boar had submitted, and the Bear under his father's. All Blacks were one tribe in name only, but Bear, Boar, or Tusk emblems still adorned hides. White or black symbols still painted their chests and arms.

Members of the Red Boar assembled in Trosgan's yard, had no desire to give up their independence either. They'd painted symbols on their armor with blood-red dye. Battle paint marked their faces and arms.

A sticky, shimmering oil—a concoction made by the shamans of the forest—covered my arms and hands, my neck and face. It tasted sweet on my lips, but the aftertaste dripping down my throat was bitter. They'd mashed flecks of a silver-leafed plant into it. I sparkled like the shaman's charm dangling from the rafters above my cot.

All assembled grumbled and murmured. They averted their gaze when I looked their way. My mother's pride churned in my gut, and I swayed, lightheaded, the soles of my feet hot and tingling. Ten rings were too few for the humiliation I endured.

“We see you have many gods in your favor, Trosgan,” a Red Boar said. He blustered, but he didn’t step forward. “But our shamans do not see this future for the Red Boar. They see nothing but ill-omen in the offspring of Ranna.”

Ranna, the twins’ dead mother.

Trosgan grunted, his enormous fist near enough for me to hear the knuckles cracking. “Show him, priestess.”

His request caught me unprepared. All eyes turned my way, most staring at my feet or hands. There was suspicion, curiosity, but also fear.

I looked to my master, who gave no sign except to furrow her brow in annoyance.

Trosgan’s fist slammed down on the stone bench. I thought he’d cracked it, but the violence had the desired effect because a sheet of shadow rose about me, then sunk into me, rippling with power. The pattern repeated with each beat of my heart, and with each rising the Reds—most everyone present—gasped, grunted, or stuttered a prayer to their gods. Only my master and her household remained unconcerned. There was nothing to it, just an eerie display, a small defense all Mornae possessed. It faded as my fear of the chief diminished. My mother had woven shadow into something greater, but I didn’t have the ability, and I was glad it had not become more.

The display worked, however, because the Red Boar elders agreed the twins *were* a good omen for the Baikal. It was a promising start in the chief’s mind. Raurim glared at me from behind hooded lids.

Next time, my master demanded twenty rings and no oils. My appearance had offended her, too.

The chief accepted her terms.

O n the other side of my master's hut, there was a clearing in the forest where the men of her household, Baikal and Veikal alike, cut wood, sharpened weapons, butchered animals, and stretched hides. These men had joined her as a favor to Trosgan. It was a common thing for Baikal children to receive such pledges, but only until she reached her twelfth year. After that, my master would need to garner support of her own and earn her people's respect if she wanted to gain power among her kind. It could never satisfy her to just sit the rise beside Yorl, not if he held all the pledges.

She must have her own.

Loga handed me my work, gave orders to each of the women, and we all sat down on the pine-covered ground. My master had set it in her mind to chop wood. Ironwood requires great strength to chop, and when she'd heard Yorl was chopping it, she'd determined to outdo him.

My master picked up an ironwood branch from a pile of thin logs used for fashioning cages, and she ran her hand along it, removing the bark and smoothing it out. Splinters and black bark flicked away from her hand. She waved it back and forth like it was an axe haft.

“Teach me to fight,” she said to a group of ragged-looking Veikal huddled about the tanning racks.

They looked at each other and shook their heads. The chief may have given her permission to hunt, but there’d been no direct command to teach her how, much less how to fight. And these Veikal seemed to know the difference.

She remained adamant, but these Veikal were all broken and scarred by hard living. She was yet untouched by life. She may be stronger than them, but they had skills she didn’t. I couldn’t bear to see her hurt.

“Teach me,” my master repeated, looking each one in the eye.

The Veikal women, those who’d been with her from her birth, snickered. Not Loga, though. She smacked the nearest one—Uma, a western Veikal.

My master didn’t throw a tantrum. She stepped into their circle, and I swallowed hard.

“Teach me.” Her voice remained unchanged, neither whining nor pleading. It was solid, like a command.

One Veikal stepped up to her. He must have been an accomplished hunter. His body was a wreck of scars, burns, and breaks, but somehow he held together. He was a nine-footer, tall for a Veikal, and he leaned over her, looming over all seven feet of her like she was a child—which she was, but not to look at her. She was hard and already well-muscled.

“Barka’s beard,” he muttered. “I serve because I must.” It wasn’t good for her to make demands.

My master’s brow furrowed, and her gaze lowered. “Who was your father?” she asked. It was a proper courtesy to ask about one’s ancestry.

The man grunted. "My father was Drur. I am his second son, Drog."

"Drur was a skilled hunter."

He nodded. "That he was. Hunted the Great Mother."

The other hunters nodded their approval. No Baikal or Veikal I'd known up to that point had ever admitted to hunting men, raiding, and taking thralls. This was a recent thing brought about by Trosgan. An expert hunter hunted the gods of the forest and hills: wolves, bears, boars, elk, and moose. There were others, mythical creatures, but I'd never seen those carcasses.

Drog was a man caught between Baikal and other humans, not one and not the other. Yet he didn't harbor as much frustration as the other Veikal I'd known. He was unpleasant to look at; pale blue eyes set deep in a gaunt, awkward face that was square where it should be round and round where it ought to be square.

He took her stick in one hand and gave a sudden tug. She held it firm, and he leaned forward as she drew it back. He grinned down at her, his mouth missing teeth, I guessed from a Baikal's blow.

"The chief could have my hide nailed to the wall of his hut," Drog said, the words sputtering from his lips.

"Teach me." She didn't remind him *she* was the master of this household.

Drog scanned the yard, meeting everyone's gaze, including mine. "Any of you blab, I'll skin you alive." He spat out a wad of saliva.

"Teach me." My master yanked the stick out of his hand.

He scowled as a splinter lodged in his palm. He glanced over at me. "She has to be here?"

Despite all his advantages, he worried about me being so close. He thought to ask again, but then rubbed a charm he wore about his neck. A hunter, he preferred to serve Melka, Lord of the Forest.

Around his upper arms, he bore the trophies of his kills: fangs and teeth, claws and horns.

"Barka's breath," my master said, shaking her head. "She must." It wasn't a demand. She agreed with him that I was an annoyance, and that solidarity helped her cause with him.

"Fine," he growled. "But no cheats." By that, he meant magic. I'd no idea what my master's magic might be, but I'd seen the shaman and Baikal warriors summon their god's power. "Just sticks. You break something of mine, no more teaching. I've earned my place."

He meant that he'd earned respect among the Zelaugr—not a thrall, but a clan member. He had his own hut, men under him, three mates, and a dozen children.

She nodded.

His lips twisted. "I'll teach you, Aelaku." The others grumbled, but he was a leader among them.

My master had won over her first pledge. That's how it was with them.

And so began her lessons. We worked while my master trained. The other Veikal men sometimes watched, and they accepted her into their circle, teaching her whatever skills they had, but these were hunters, not warriors. They assisted the chief in his hunts, though he hunted and raided less often. He was becoming a new sort of chief. Others did the work while he sat on his rump, taxing thralls and goods from those who served him.

By the next year, my master was fighting two hunters at a time with a long staff, and she knew how to throw an axe, shoot a bow, and thrust a spear. She learned more than hunting techniques, but kept it well hidden. When we sat in the chief's yard, she sat with her women and watched the boys battle with clubs and staves.

Like her, I learned what I could. It was easier studying just one Baikal at a time. In the moots, it became impossible to focus on just one. I sought to understand my master first and best, even if only on the periphery of her aches and pains. With just her present, I could be still and listen, and listening led to feeling—not as something remote, but in my body. What had once been a jumble of feelings and sensations narrowed to knowledge of specific blood vessels widening and tightening, the flushing of skin, the fibers of muscles swelling and flexing. I didn't possess their strength, but I felt it like I did. It was heady. Exhilarating. It embarrassed me to appreciate the very things which had killed my mother.

One time in the yard, Drog struck my master so hard it should have broken a bone. Instead, she snarled and responded with a flurry of strikes, her bones seeming to harden even more.

With the thrill came the pain, which I experienced as acutely as the strength. Over time, I became less sensitive to it, as tempered as the giants themselves were to physical blows, but I was not yet so controlled. As soon as I thought I had a hold of my gift, I'd lose myself, swaying, sometimes fainting.

On one occasion, I roused from a spell and looked up into my master's face, sweat streaming onto me, a large welt across her arm. The heat of pain throbbed in me still, and the blood had rushed through me so hard that I'd fainted. My power wanted to flow unbridled, to lose itself in so many sensations. I indulged it because I didn't know any better.

Her annoyance—her *embarrassment*—chastised me. I made every effort not to let it happen again.

A forest surrounded and wove itself into the fabric of Rothmin's Stead. The Stead included the chief's village, a trading hub located closer to the Flats, and various other steads—collections of huts under the rule of a clan head. Trosgan occupied the chief's hut behind the rise-hut, but he also had a cluster of huts for his women, his warriors, hunters, and those he wished to keep close. The twins each had the beginnings of their own steads growing out from the huts they'd occupied as children.

So tall they blocked out the sky, ironwoods rose above us as we foraged. They were the hardiest tree in the north, and dark like the blackrock. My hand hovered over the jagged bark. Ironwood bark could slice a non-giant's hand to the bone. I'd bandaged many thralls' hands because of it.

That day, two female thralls and I were collecting plants for dyes. We picked bright green moss growing at the base of the ironwoods. The moss had healing properties, but also served well as a dye. Yellow flowers called Sayin's tears overflowed from my bag.

Timoth and Jorn, assigned by the chief to serve as my guards, walked to either side of us. We'd walked far, scraping clean the bases of old ironwoods so massive we disappeared between their

roots. My little power sought the other thralls and even the Baikal—holding them in my thoughts, wishing them to be at peace and not to cause trouble. I didn't think they would, but I preferred our guards to be calm.

Timoth walked close to one thrall, sometimes crouching down to see what she was picking. There was something sweet and terrifying about it. She was so tiny compared to him.

I paused and shielded my eyes, looking up ahead to a bright clearing. Dark shapes bounded in the light.

“Eskar,” Jorn said.

“What are they?” I asked. I shouldn't have spoken freely, but he'd volunteered a conversation. He kept his distance from me, though, and his tight lips seemed reluctant to continue.

“Horses.”

“For Baikal?”

He snorted.

I couldn't imagine the size of such a mount.

“Eskar,” I whispered. It must be a minor god, like Mahwir the boar or Barona the bear. The ground rumbled as the massive figures passed by the edge of the forest, cutting through the light pouring into the meadow they ran in.

Jorn grunted and turned. “Barka's breath,” he muttered and started back down the trail to the stead. “Everyone to the huts.”

I ran past a cluster of thick trunks to understand what he saw.

Vilki, standing out between the trees and vegetation, beckoned me from the backyard of my master's hut. My heart sank. I'd forgotten the time.

Timoth cursed under his breath and urged the thralls to move, his great arms waving with greater care than most Baikal. One tiny thrall

stumbled over a large root. Timoth waited. The other two thralls also struggled, but Timoth just grunted. I liked him already.

I ran down toward Vilki.

“She’s asking for you,” she said.

Dormu was soon at her side. “You best get moving.”

My master had been hunting in the high valleys behind the stead. We’d expected her return in the evening.

“I’ll take those, Dalis,” Vilki said to me, taking the bags with flowers and moss. She’d never called me that before. It was a nicer word than daemon, but like all divine things, it had a dangerous edge to it.

When I entered the hut, my master had already left for the baths. Dormu picked up my master’s kit from where she’d sloughed it off. I ran off and waited outside the baths. Veikal women entered and exited, and I realized that I’d left my guards behind. I sat by myself in the open for the first time since I’d been a child in my mother’s care.

Baikal passed by, and their great strides tingled in me. I gazed at the pebbles dancing on the ground. I must keep myself still, unafraid.

My gift unfurled. It slipped away from me, as protective of me as the shadows which shielded my body. It plunged into those great bodies so that, in seconds, the swelling and sinking, stretching, pushing, and pulling of ligaments and muscles rolled through me. The massive hearts pumping and plunging blood. The shudder of bone through those great bodies as they took steps rattled me.

A hand the size of a bucket swung toward me, but I’d already moved out of the way. Somehow, I’d known it was coming. I gasped as it swung back. Cold sweat covered my face. The giant hadn’t even noticed me and was carrying on with his companion. He backed up then to where I stood, and again I moved. He smashed

into the side of the bath hut, roaring with laughter. The hut's timbers rattled.

I inched away to safety. His companion noticed me—eyes wide, terrified, rage rising. Their chests puffed up. They both barked at me. I remembered my mother's killer. Heat swelled at my heels, the shadows threatening to rise to defend me. I opened my mouth to call for Timoth—

Just then, my master emerged from the bath hut, frowning. I tried to be aware of her at every moment, but not this time. These two Baikal almost crushing me commanded all my attention.

I bowed my head to her, and the Baikal backed off, giving her the space due a daughter of Aelath.

“Move along,” she commanded them. They slid past, eyes on me. I felt glued to them, and I had to wrench my little power away. Their feelings, their fear, echoed in me. I rubbed at my forehead. I was still sweating and trembling. I was on the verge of tears, but swallowed past the painful knot in my throat.

She stared at me askance. When I regained my composure, she looked away.

“Timoth!” she called out. She didn't speak like a child anymore, but deep and full like a grown woman.

My guards appeared then, turning the corner into the yard from behind her hut. She walked to her hut, and I followed. Disappointment filled the space between us. It was all very confusing to me. No one explained to me what they expected of a *dalis*, a daemon. I suspected they needed the term to be vague so they could change the rules when necessary.

“Aelaku, she is like a ghost,” Timoth said. He towered over her and had earned a globe already, yet concern tinged his voice.

“She vanished!” Jorn said.

My master grunted and went inside.

The guards remained outside, nervous. I glanced up at them, but offered no apology. I owed them nothing. My master, however, was another matter. Inside the hut, she went into her room, whereas I remained outside, staring at the flap.

Loga grunted at me. "What are you doing? Come work." She pointed at the flowers and moss.

I didn't know how to make it up to my master. I hadn't understood yet that I was a thrall, not her friend, and that if I displeased her, I would know it.

"Make the dye, Dalis," Vilki said.

I nodded and went back to work.

That night, I couldn't sleep despite my exhaustion. Exploring the bodies of Baikal always left me listless. I listened to the women's breath, and to my master's. At night, on nights like this, her cares slipped away. And she had so many. No wonder she thought me a burden, a yoke. I resolved to do more for her. I was a thrall, but I was also *dalis*, speaking god-words for her.

My mother had told me how there were priestesses in Vaidolin's temple who kept the blue fire burning day and night, and how they'd done this for millennia. I felt so humbled by their dedication.

Excitement swelled in me. Stars blinked through the vents in the ceiling. I was not a true priestess, but I could act like one.

I rose before the other women, washed, and prepared myself by uttering the morning ritual which my mother had performed. It seemed the right thing to do. I had to take my role more seriously.

Through one vent, Vel and Xal of Rilanic—the Forge constellation—shone bright. I placed my hands at my waist, palms up to receive the goddess-blessing.

“The goddess is my shield,” I whispered in the Mornae tongue. “I follow her path through the winding Dark.”

I spoke the sacred litany uttered by priestesses and knights for fifteen cycles.

When dawn’s light streaked across the sky, the first hoots and twitters of birds sounding in the surrounding forest, I entered my master’s section of the hut and knelt by the flap. I would be there when she rose. From that day on, I would be where she needed me to be.

When she rose, she blew past me as if I wasn’t there. I followed. Loga brought a bowl of food to her. I intercepted Loga and took it to my master. I created a space around her.

My master dug into her food and shook her head.

Loga handed me the brush. My master didn’t seem to notice. We were all beneath her. I unwound the raven-black braids, removing the silver rings—most earned through my handiwork. It was a chore to brush it out, but I was undeterred. Vilki came up beside me and helped.

My master’s silence wounded me, but what had I expected? It was not my fault they used us. And if I was honest with myself, I feared all that was happening would make the world unsafe for both of us. She had marks on her body now, from hunting and from training. Every lesson the hunters gave her put her in danger. If Yorl knew what she was learning, or any other Baikal knew, it could open another kind of world for her.

To take a weapon in hand is to invite violence. That was the Mornae saying. And the Baikal always carried weapons. They were

themselves the worst weapon of all.

The more she pushed to learn, the stronger was my need to create peace around her to control the swelling rage.

Someone would gossip. It was inevitable.

That day, I took her new braid rings and etched symbols into them, trying to imbue my intention, my desire to protect her—and me—into them. I couldn't tell if I succeeded.

The next day, I wove her hair around the etched rings, uttering prayers under my breath. I urged the goddess to protect her.

The twins' last step into adulthood started the same way as their birthday twelve years ago: grappling with each other. From where I stood, it looked more like killing than wrestling, but with the Baikal, the distinction was not always clear.

Earlier that day, I'd painted Aelath's symbols with blue-gray clay onto my master's arms and legs. Loga and Vilki had guided me while my master stared up at the ceiling as if we weren't there. We'd left her hair loose except for two braids bound in silver coils down the sides of her face. I'd etched emblems of Aelath into the silver just for this occasion. Like the Mornae sorcerers of legend, I'd willed myself into the metal. I needed her to do well.

I hid my disappointment as she wrestled on the straw covered yard, smearing the symbols, her hair messed. Angry welts left by Yorl's hands marred her pale skin.

They tore at each other like I imagined they had in the womb. She gripped handfuls of Yorl's hair in one hand, his throat in the other. He grasped her with equal vehemence. I gasped as his hands tightened on her. I felt it in my body like constricting iron bands. Tears formed at the corners of my eyes, but I held them back. As much as I wanted to know my master's feelings, I couldn't bear to.

The chief's eyes brightened as the twins rolled about on the ground, huffing, grunting, and straining for breath. He avoided my gaze. Raurim and Rigir stood rigidly, stone-faced, eyes closed to slits. Charms and wards drooped from their tall walking sticks, and their globes hung about sunken, worn-down bodies.

"Chief Trosgan, should we begin?" Raurim asked.

His lips pressed into a sneer. The most momentous of occasions don't always happen as desired. Raurim wore more layers of painted blue bones than usual. I hadn't noticed the symbols carved into them. His face had become narrower and gaunter over the years. Folds of shadows hid his pale blue eyes. Wolf fur covered his shoulders and wrapped about his legs. Everyone faced the cold when death neared. Rigir would replace him soon.

Yorl slammed my master to the ground, pressing her face to the earth. She twisted out from under him and kicked him in the gut. Trosgan snorted with laughter, his voice filling the yard. Giants shook their heads, still unconvinced of the fate spoken for the twins. There was nothing playful about them. It was like they were enemies rather than the future rulers of the tribe.

The chief shifted in his seat as soon as that reality dawned on him. "Enough! Enough!"

He chortled as the twins kept at it, grabbing for things to strike each other with. Then, he roared.

The twins froze. Neither relaxed their grip on the other, their faces stubborn and defiant.

Rage surged in the Baikal. Those against the twins saw this as an opportunity to challenge the shamans again. Pledges pushed on their lieges to step forward. There was so much uncertainty.

I hadn't seen or felt who started the fight. It might have been my master, but I suspected Yorl had instigated it somehow. Yorl's eyes

burned with hatred. Someone had fed his mind a poison, insinuating that he should not have to sit the rise with his sister.

Loga and Tanok, Yorl's minder, stepped closer, coaxing the twins with the chieftain's words. The dread power of the sea—and the wind, in my master's case—roiled through them. It was pure chaos, unpredictable and unstoppable.

“So then!” the chief said. His voice boomed so loud that I felt it in my bones. All in the yard froze—especially the thralls. “Three each,” he said, waving the new thralls forward. “Let us see how well you manage.”

My master stood up and brushed herself off, her brow still hard, eyes narrowed.

Yorl tried to give her one more push, but she withstood him and pushed back. He chuckled and wiped his bloody lip. The chief let out a final hoot of laughter.

Raurim held up his hand, interpreting the wind's movement. “Aelath is a patient goddess, young man, but beware.”

Yorl's lips twisted at the shaman's words. He yanked the rope from the handler and pulled his three thralls toward him. Three scrawny men, only five feet tall, fell, and then scrambled over each other to avoid Yorl's hand. They shrieked and wailed as he thumped them.

Though I despised Yorl, I couldn't help but gather what knowledge I could. His legs stiffened, bracing for a strike. He wanted to crush the thralls and put his size and strength on display. His thralls screeched all the louder. They did nothing to help themselves. I doubted they'd live more than a week, much less the expected year. A chief must know how to manage thralls.

Yorl stomped his feet to quiet them through terror. His greedy hands curled around the rope, white-knuckled. One man cried out as

Yorl stepped on his leg and then his spine as he crawled away. So it went, Yorl attempting to manage his newfound wealth.

The chief sat up as his precious boy crushed a man's head.

"Give me others, Father!" Yorl yelled, kicking the dead man. The remaining unharmed thrall sobbed. Each heave of his chest matched a rise of rage in Yorl. He'd be dead soon.

Raurim shook his head at the chief's questioning gaze.

"But I can give him some of my own?" the chief asked.

Raurim gave a single nod.

The chief let out a long breath but avoided looking at his son. They'd have words later. Yorl's minders, gnarled old Veikal who'd survived the boy, ran forward to untangle the mess of the two dead thralls and drag away the remains.

Baikal started walking away as if the event was over.

Raurim straightened and shook his staff. The bone charms rattled as hair-thin, imperceptible lines of white light leapt between them like a minute thunderstorm.

"Aelath will speak next!" he yelled at them, his voice like crackling embers.

The departing Baikal turned back. Raurim cleared his throat and glared at me.

I turned my attention back to my master. The mass of giants shook the ground with their steps, and I sought to anchor myself in her—at least to keep from trembling.

"Take them," my master said to me. She was only twelve—a child to the Mornae, but she already commanded like an adult. I hadn't expected to have a role in the event. Raurim and my master saw things differently. She'd show her power by commanding me.

Her thralls, two women and a man, squirmed, red-eyed. A scream gathered in them, building in strength. My master had no

desire for them to make such a spectacle.

I stepped closer to the Veikal handler. Hands down, my little power crept into each thrall, following their trembling nerves and muscles, their chattering bones, up to their skulls. Their fear washed over me like an icy stream. Once I'd waded far enough into their minds to find the spring of their fear, I soothed them with thoughts of my own. I reassured them they'd not face the same fate as Yorl's thralls, not with my master. She'd dress and feed them well, better than any other Baikal would. She'd not put them in cages or bind them with ropes. I soothed them until they calmed. To me, it seemed like hours passed, but it was only seconds.

The rope lead shivered in my hand. If I wrapped it about my hand, it would bind me, squeezing to a tight fit.

The Baikal murmured, but their feelings toward my master changed. They'd expected her to rage, to throw a fit like a young Baikal. Instead, it had been Yorl, the favored son, who'd smashed one thrall's head and mangled another's body.

I led the train of thralls to my master's huts. True to my word, I did not put them in pens or cages, but assigned each a cot with wool blankets and a fleece.

I wouldn't lie to them. I'd protect them with whatever power I had.

Two years passed, and Chief Trosgan made little progress in bringing the remaining tribes under his rule. Even what remained of the other Blacks still refused—Boar, Bear, and Tusk. There were pockets of ancient bloodlines scattered through the Horn Mountains, and they followed their own elders and would not take the Zelaugr name.

And so, over time, I learned more about the Baikal. About the Blacks and Whites, Reds and Blues, and then the Yellows, covered in yellow ochre paints who sometimes crossed the Moon Sea from far-off places.

I'd thought they named their tribes for the colors of Vai. Her face could be red or blue, but most often pale yellow—and, of course, white. But it was for other reasons they took these names. The beasts along the path of the goddess often had black teeth and claws. On the western coast, their furs were reddish. I named the tribes by colors, but the Baikal word was more specific. To them it meant the people of the black-furred and black-toothed beasts that live in the blackrock mountains. That was the full meaning of the Baikal word I'd translated as *black*.

But no matter how much the chief brought me out to speak my goddess-word, my hair and eyes gleaming with her power, the other tribes resisted.

I didn't blame them, and I did not persuade them otherwise. I liked the Baikal much more when they were doing the things Baikal had done before Rothmin's rule. Let them hunt, proud and blessed by their gods, shaking the earth and waving their hammers. Beating down smaller peoples and putting them in cages, binding them till they died inside and out, ate at the Baikal... though they didn't say it. They didn't even know what they felt. It lurked like a shadow in their minds. Their gods had made them for greater things.

Trosgan seemed to hold power by a thread, but that thread often felt like an iron band.

One night, at the spring moot, a proud Baikal of the Belaigr—the Black Bear Claw, a remnant clan of the Black Bear who still refused to accept Rothmin's rule—stood forth and spoke what festered in them.

Tauk was a fine specimen: thirteen feet tall, with gleaming black hair braided with leather bands, his chest bare but covered in the marks of his gods, and burly arms wrapped in bear claws woven together by thick twine. Flecks of lightning sparked in his pale blue eyes, stored there by his ancestors after so many generations of serving the sea god. He bore no globes, and didn't seem to need them. I thought his pride magnificent.

“What need do we have for trinkets from southern lands?” Tauk asked, bright-eyed and with his hands out in a sign of peace. “For thralls, even?”

The crowd murmured. He waited before continuing, seeing it was dangerous to challenge their source of wealth.

“I am Baikal,” he said, his voice rising. “Son of the Sea!” He thumped his chest. “All I need is my gods, my mate, to see my sons grow, and to await Aelath’s gift.” He turned to Trosgan. “You have all you need. Why seek more?”

I’d never heard such talk before, and I wanted to know the man’s thoughts more deeply. My little power crept up the length of him. Hundreds of generations serving their god forged him—like the Mornae. There was a dignity in him, a fierce truth which I admired. I didn’t soothe his simmering rage.

“You want too little,” the chief said. “You see too little!”

My master shifted in her seat. Her father had the thing Baikal desired most. *Daughters. True* daughters. With them, they could rebuild the Baikal, making them a power in Vailassa again. There’d been a time, though maybe it was just legend, when Baikal stood fifteen feet tall and Veikal didn’t exist. Like Tauk, Baikal longed for that past, and saw daughters of Aelath as the way.

Tauk shook his head. “I know what the gods have said since the great desolation. Our ancestors still speak.”

The shamans also wanted that past more than anything. Trosgan resisted them. They’d made this deal with him, the oracle about the twins sitting the rise together, to ensure both realities. But they strained against each other, uneasy partners in a lie. And yet, it *wasn’t* a lie—not the shaman’s part of it, at least.

Trosgan grimaced. Sneered, even. “I don’t need smoke to know what is coming. To see it with my own eyes.” His eyes widened for effect.

Tauk huffed. “You are always talking of such things, but all I see is a *groth* mouthing strange words.” A *groth*, as far as I could interpret it, meant a rotted-out log that looks strong until you strike

with it. Then, it shatters. “If there is a great evil coming to us, then we must face it with the strength that made us.”

Trosgan held in his anger, patting his silk tunic, a mass of cloth covering his bulk, gliding over once powerful limbs gone slack from years of loafing. “That is easy to say while you prowl about rocky hills and forgotten woods, sleeping in caves, covered in stink, not a ring to your name. You complain, but I know many of yours are the ones raiding the northernmost villages and selling their folk in my markets.”

He glanced my way. Ah, he wanted to wound me, to make me realize that these foul men had been the same kind that had captured me. His thick fingers tugged at the silver chains draped around his neck, each one bearing at least a dozen thrall tokens. Rings of silver, engraved with his god’s symbols, wrapped around his arms. Gems studded his braids. He no longer wielded his hammer or axe, and no longer ran the hunts himself. Instead, he ordered others to do it. He was making himself chief of chiefs.

“We raid,” Tauk said, his gaze low. “I won’t deny it. We will reclaim our territory.”

Trosgan gave a languid wave. “The stones mean nothing. They mark nothing.” This didn’t sit well with the assembled shamans who believed their ancient ancestors had erected the stones. Their stories told of Barka, Melka, Aelath, and others as the first giants, all of them mighty beings a hundred feet tall.

Tauk’s jaw shifted back and forth as he considered what to say. The chief had him. At least Trosgan was honest about his wealth and made no pretense of serving the gods. He served himself, his lineage.

Baikal shook their heads. The assembly was not with Tauk.

“I am Belaigr.” With that, Tauk left, only a handful following him.

Loyalty was the real currency, but its value waxed and waned worse than quick Yalloc's passage through the night sky.

I never saw that Black Bear elder at a moot again. I never saw the Black Bear Claw mark anywhere again. Tauk had expressed the most truth I'd heard in a while. His poor choices had burdened him, and I'd heard my mother's own bitterness in his words, wanting so much for things to be a certain way and living another.

After that day, I'd sometimes search for such dissidents in the moots, to see if they'd found new homes among other tribes, but my skill, like their rage, was a blunt, brute hammer strike. I learned that there was only so much I could do, only so much I could know. My gift was useful, but it had limits, the primary one being my inexperience and lack of knowledge.

I was a fragile vessel containing the storming sea.

One night in the twins' fifteenth year, the Baikal gathered in the chief's yard for the convergence of the four moons. Dark Suvae was also there, hidden behind Cassan's light, so it was the five consort moons. The Mornae called them the consort moons—meaning the consorts of the goddess. She alone could bind five mates to herself, not to mention her ancient love, the earth god. It was a significant event to have them together in the night sky. My people, the Mornae, sweet-scented and beautiful, would celebrate under this same sky with ceremonies. I invented rituals and played them out in my mind, imagining tall, lithe creatures of white and gray and black bathed in the light of the five consort moons.

Not like this at all. My nostrils flared at the charred flesh, blood, and fat bubbling and dripping into the coals. The reek of giant, hides, and greasy furs assaulted me. When the giants stood, they blotted out the sky, casting shadows on me so that I could not enjoy the view.

The consort moons shone with diffuse light, unlike the goddess's harsh, bright white. If I looked more closely, with my Mornae eyes, the strands of power manifested themselves to me, increased in strength by the contest between the world and the five consorts.

I didn't know what a sorcerer would say about that explanation. My mother would have laughed. I thought foolish things.

The chief sat on his porch, surrounded by his women and warriors. You'd not have thought from the sight of him and his entourage that he was failing to realize his vision. Silks and furs wrapped around his shoulders, and uncut gems the size of walnuts set in iron dangled from his neck. Baikal in the yard raised hammers to him, calling his name as if he were Barka himself. How proud he was! The swelling of pride in his chest burrowed in me, souring my mood. He was doing away with the people I liked—the very few Baikal I admired.

Rigir winked at me, grinning through his heavy jowls. That night, he acted in Raurim's place as the elder of the hill. He scanned the crowd from one side of the porch, staff in hand, sullen. Raurim often went up into the hills, communing with the gods, and leaving Rigir in charge. Rigir disliked these gatherings. Speaking god-words was dangerous. One misstep was all it would take to lead these Baikal into a frenzy. That was how I sensed it. I could have been wrong, but the way Rigir glared at everyone told me I was reading it all correctly. He'd soon be the shepherd, and he didn't seem pleased to hold the crook, even for a night.

A scuffle broke out. Timoth, sitting next to me, rose. A half-second earlier and he'd have knocked me over, but I'd sensed the stretch and strain in his joints, the energy rushing through him to bring his bulk up from his seat. I'd moved a hair's breadth from his swinging hand and squeezed myself into a sliver of space as giants lumbered about me. Their massive bulk moved faster than one would think possible. I tamped down hard on the fear that sat like a stone in my gut. Fear was like a prey's scent on the wind to a wolf; it

would stoke and drive their rage. I shifted, but my master tilted her head toward me, and I remained seated.

Yorl straddled a man, a Veikal. I couldn't tell the difference between one man's rage and another's pain... I'd lost track. My little power rushed headlong into the chaos to understand.

Yorl's arms swung back and forth, smashing at the man with all his fury. I struggled to breathe, even though nothing was touching me. The rushing of blood thrumming through Yorl's body, stretching muscle and then tightening, sinew straining, crushed me from all sides. And the rage, *always* the rage, was driving it all.

I thought I would crack open. Cold sweat trickled down my face and body. His rage would rule me if I continued like that; it would take over and consume me. Something in me recoiled at his brute power, but another part of me savored it.

Above all, Mornae seek power.

His power was not just muscle and sinew, but also his god's strength. Through slitted eyes, I witnessed the tendrils of power in the air, reaching down from the sky and gathering in him, coating him in a sheen of crackling light. He'd instigated the fight on purpose. His body trembled to draw it into himself.

My eyelids flickered as I struggled to remain standing, such was the roar of sensation shuddering through me.

Those who'd been sitting with the now dead Veikal stepped aside. No one wanted to be associated with him, not even his remains. They backed away from it. *Dreka*. Something even lower than a curse—shit on the floor. Forgotten by all.

Elders and their men joined in, arguing and shoving each other. My master just watched, refusing to let the scuffle draw her in as others were.

Yorl stood, chest heaving, blood and pieces of the man covering him. Baikal surged to him, eager to show their support. The dead man had belonged to a Red Bear household.

“The man cheated! Me! Barka’s breath!” Yorl bellowed each word, his voice tinged with power. The dead man was just the start of the plot. They must want to start something with his liege.

Those around him agreed about the cheating. Others shook their heads, looking down at the dicing bowl cut in the ground. The bone dice, singed with marks on multiple sides, swirled about in a pool of the dead man’s blood.

One Veikal reached for them, but Yorl snorted and stomped his foot. The bowl and its contents shuddered, rippling like a tiny red pond in a strong wind.

“Mischief! That’s what it was!” He scanned the yard, looking for me. “Dark magic.”

A murmur ran through the assembly.

One Veikal—a friend of the dead man—let out an anguished roar, cried Barka’s name, and lunged at Yorl from within the deep shadows cast by the fire, knife in hand. Yorl closed his fists, body turning rigid as he prepared for the blow, and just stood there as the man slashed at him, his iron blade skidding and sliding across his chest and gut, leaving nothing but the thinnest of cuts.

I closed my eyes as Yorl prepared to strike the hapless man, who still struggled to damage him. I covered my mouth, squeezing my lips tight as the rumble of power flowed through his body to his arm and hand, and crushed the man’s face in. The power of his limbs was beyond anything I’d yet experienced. I let out a quiet, trembling breath.

Yorl grunted, grimacing with effort. The air tingled and smelled of lightning. Before our eyes, the cuts sealed up, and only drying

droplets of blood remained on his skin.

The chief winked at him from beneath a bushy eyebrow, but then he slammed his fist down to restore order. All the while, a smile curled his lips.

“Enough! Enough!” He chortled despite the rage growing in those gathered.

This was what he’d wanted them all to see. They’d know now that Yorl was already an adult, already commanding the cherished powers of the Baikal. Mundane weapons couldn’t harm him—except in the hand of another Baikal, and then only with significant force.

The dead men’s liege rose, hand out to Yorl. He expected payment for losing his men. And these were not thralls, but men of his household.

Yorl grinned at him through a curtain of blood. This Baikal was the actual target, an elder of the Red Bear.

“He cheated!” Yorl boomed at the Red Bear, his face turning from glee to threat. “He got what he deserved! Veikal should know their place.”

This Baikal he was challenging was no slouch. A dozen blue globes hung from his harness, and he towered over Yorl.

I measured their power, sensing the movements before they could begin and predicting their next moves. My heart sank, fearful for my master. As much as I despised Yorl, they had bound her future to his, as they’d done to me.

My master tilted her head then, looking over her shoulder at me. She frowned and turned back to the coming fight. She must join them if she was to sit the rise. Perhaps Yorl wanted that. They were making room for a fight.

The chief laughed, thumping the stone seat with his fist. “My son has the fury of Barka in him! Always at the ready! Like a real chief!”

His supporters cheered.

My master didn't reach for her weapon—a hunter's axe resting against her thigh. She kept her power secret. I'd glimpsed it in the thrall yard, but she wasn't yet ready for something like this. She kept her mouth shut.

Yorl had the rough, untested power of his people, but the Baikal elder before him had weapons and skill, and he knew violence against an equal match. Fighting him would not be the same as demolishing a Veikal or two.

Concern heightened in me so my chest constricted. I could bear the chaos no longer. I let my breath and my power flow out to create peace.

Yorl was stubborn. He smeared the blood on his face like he was swatting at an annoying gnat. He didn't want his rage soothed.

The Red Bear's hand rested on the pommel of a wide blade used for hacking at close range. Looking Yorl over, and then the chief, he seemed unimpressed, like he knew what they were about. He looked to Rigir next. "This is no night for death," he said, glancing up at the consort moons. "I'll not offend the gods."

Rigir grimaced and rattled his staff. The bone charms clacked.

"Give me what you owe, youngling," the elder said to Yorl. "These men were of my clan." He was proud, in control of himself, and the dead men had been more than just members of his household. They'd been friends, trusted companions on the hunt. Veikal were not always thralls in their tribes. Some earned freedom after long years of service, passed on from father to son. Their daughters, at least, could break that bondage by mating with a Baikal. This Red would not let them see how much the Veikal deaths cost him, but Yorl, smirking, knew it.

“Come, come, Druhn!” the chief said. “Your man cheated. All here say it. Under the light of the gods.”

“He did *not* cheat!” Druhn roared, his self-control fraying at the edges. His grip tightened on the pommel of his weapon. The smell of burning air increased, singeing my nostrils.

Yorl held out his hand for a weapon, but his father signaled him with a slight wave. He snorted and stomped out of the yard, his entourage following him. Supporters got up to follow as well, leaving empty gaps around every fire.

Trosgan chuckled again and shrugged. “Your men should not cheat. Red Bear should honor the gods.” He’d said it with a wink to Rigir, whose sullenness only increased. This was not what the shaman wanted. None of it. He needed the Reds to make the Baikal strong again, strong in the way the shamans desired them to be.

Yorl and the chief had known the man’s weakness for his friends and exploited it. I marveled at their shrewdness. I’d been wrong about the Baikal. The chief would wield his son’s power like a hammer and draw more to himself.

Druhn snorted, tamping down his rage. “I sit here to honor the gods.”

His people agreed.

“Yes, yes,” Trosgan said. “Red Bears honor the gods.” He chortled as Druhn went off to the corner of the yard where the Reds huddled around a fire they’d lit themselves. He sat with his back to Trosgan while his men watched, hands on their weapons.

My master motioned to one of her Veikal hunters, whispering something to him. She handed him a ring of silver from her arm. The hunter walked across the yard and offered Druhn the ring, uttering the words my master had given him to speak.

Druhn took the silver band etched by my hand. He held it up to the light. It was worth a fortune because / had crafted it. Anything I touched took on a power, a magic, whether I'd put my intention into it or not.

He tucked it away and nodded to my master.

At the next moot, Druhn announced that he'd pledge himself to my master on her elder-day, along with a dozen of his people.

If she'd wanted to rankle her father and brother, she'd found a sure way. After that day, Reds sought her out to join her hunts, to sit near her fire, and more. She was the only daughter of Aelath, and her actions spoke more of the gods than Trosgan's or Yorl's.

With additional supporters and future pledges, my master's striving only intensified. She must have realized the weakening power of the oracle. She pushed herself harder and harder, learning and mastering her strength with the help of her new allies. It was not enough to be the daughter of Aelath. She demanded that they call her a Son of the Sea. Her new pledges did so with pleasure, if only to irk the chief and Yorl even more.

They revered and honored her. She was everything they desired.

And I stood there at her back, witnessing, speaking a god-word on her behalf. Unseen currents of favor and disfavor, alliance and dissidence, flowed and eddied beneath the surface of every interaction.

The chief had the wealth to pay for Yorl's challenges, but there was more to it than that. If they found out an elder had a notion to oust the chief or supplant the twins, they didn't wait. The Chief or Yorl provoked the target in public. At first, I'd thought it was just Yorl's unchecked fury, but now I saw how the chief directed it all.

He'd laugh at his son's recklessness and pay off the losers if necessary to make amends, but all along, his son's strength was on display. More Baikal rallied to Yorl.

I waited for it all to come crashing down on my master. I draped my little power over the household thralls, soothing fears and keeping everything in harmony to preserve what little peace there was, but always so that none could ever suspect me. I was not skilled enough yet to distinguish it all, and the feelings and sensations came to me in a torrent.

This solitude exhausted me, and except for Loga, no one talked to me. No one dared touch me. The Baikal told stories about the daemons that lived in the goddess's crater—terrifying beings. They'd cast out the legendary creatures living there. They feared me for that reason, but superstition has its limits.

On the outside, I maintained my mother's composure, but inside, I suffered. Change was coming. How could it not?

Until that time, I'd thought the Baikal incapable of the same cleverness as the Mornae. Over the following years, they would disabuse me of the idea in the most brutal fashion. It had started that night of the five consorts. I'd caught on to the chief's strategy to unify the tribes by crushing all opposition, even if it meant losing the very thing that made them what they were.

The Baikal of this age suffered from fear more than anything. They huddled around Yorl's strength.

My master had yet to show them another way.

Every day, fights broke out. Baikal challenged the chief and Yorl. The Reds remained reticent and unhappy. What they wanted wasn't unreasonable, but he'd have them do things *his* way. They wanted to range over hills, mountains, and forests. Hunting and seeking their gods was their calling, not managing ropes of thralls.

They didn't want to pledge themselves to Yorl, much less the chief. They loved my master, though they also used her to vex the chief.

The chief played a wily game of coaxing them to his way before they left him no choice. But on this night, something new was happening. Today, things hadn't gone as the chief had wanted.

One such time, households clustered on their own porches while the returning hunt gathered in the chief's yard to show off their kills, to tell tall tales.

The twins faced each other, bloodied weapons in hand. I couldn't tell whether it was boar's blood or their own. My heart sat in my throat, a painful lump. My eyes stung and my lips trembled. Goddess above, I'd spent every day expecting this clash.

I probed them—sloppy, my mother would have said—but there was only the familiar tightening and loosening, the rushing of blood

as they readied themselves to fight. I couldn't tell what was of my master or Yorl or any other Baikal nearby. It all tangled in me, throbbing like a racing heart.

My master was better prepared. She'd been training every day, asking anyone she could to teach her. I'd even convinced two of her thralls to show her the movements of their own warriors. The hunters had continued to lead her deeper into the woods, searching for larger prey.

The chief had tried to buy them off, to keep them from teaching her, but my master kept them well-paid, their women and children clothed and housed better than most Veikal. There was no greater commodity to a Veikal than a good Baikal liege.

My master's men dragged a boar's carcass to the center of the gathering. It was enormous to me—as large as Baku, the musk ox who'd carried me to Hendar's.

Raurim was at the chief's side, talking, waving his free hand about, slamming down his staff so that all the bone charms rattled. The chief was reluctant to accept what Raurim wanted.

"I killed also, Great Chief!" Yorl yelled. His men dragged in three huge elk and laid them at Trosgan's feet. "Three of Shol's!"

I shivered. His voice was rage-tinged, and everyone noticed. He was young, but already possessed the voice of dread. It could paralyze non-Baikal with fear, making combat near impossible. My bones tingled. I didn't think my master had that power yet. She never thundered or bellowed. Her power lay in a silence that unnerved most around her. She remained quiet now and looked at Raurim.

"Chief Trosgan," Raurim said for all to hear. "Those of the forest have declared *this* beast of Mahwir's brood. Your daughter, daughter of Aelath, daughter of Rothmin, omen of well-being, master of the

Dark Goddess's priestess..." He gave all her titles, anything he could think of to remind everyone present of her place of honor.

My master needed to do well if Yorl was to succeed, but not *too* well. And she couldn't help outshining him, it seemed. Yorl hated that.

I'd have liked her to shine less, but I couldn't decide what was best for our survival.

Led by one named Hiltham, Reds of various tribes shouldered their way into the gathering.

"Looks like Mahwir's brood to me," Hiltham said. Boar tusks painted red fanned out over his broad chest. He was young, handsome for a giant, fourteen feet tall, with sandy brown hair cut short, his beard tied into two strands. His energy filled me, so different from the ugliness I'd felt from others, as he inspected the boar. "A mighty victory, Chief Trosgan. Who took it down?"

He knew very well who, and was already turning and smiling at my master. She didn't frown at him, but offered no smile. She only cared for the chief's judgement.

Trosgan snorted. "It is a decent size, yes. All can see that. But *Mahwir's* brood?"

Hiltham held up a tusk dangling from his harness. "This is of Mahwir's brood." He glanced down at the tusk protruding from the dead boar's mouth. "That one is larger."

I pressed my lips together, suppressing a laugh as Trosgan shifted, trying to think of an out. He didn't want to admit the truth. His daughter was only a tool to him. They must not see her as a threat. Let her hunt, let her fight, but for the chief's purposes. Because if something happened to her, if the Baikal rejected the omen, then the tide would shift. There were rivals everywhere, both within the Zelaugr and outside, in other bands. I could name at least five other

major clans or tribes scattered throughout the region, all of them undermining Trosgan's rule. And then there were the tribes of the Moon Sea. And those of the deep north—the Whites—long forgotten. But forgotten things often make themselves remembered.

The chief shook his head, gems in his braided beard sparkling in the firelight. "The Daughter of Aelath has slain one of Mahwir's brood," the chief said in a faint voice. "This is a good omen." He motioned Raurim forward with a grunt. The elder shaman shuffled to my master, bone charms and trinkets clacking and tinkling with each step, and opened his hand. An enchanted globe sat within his palm. It appeared to be of solid glass, but it had properties of *zaeress*, like my mother's dagger. It bore power.

My master took it and held it up for all to see. It lay dull and unlit in her hand. Raurim rose to his fullest height, his long arms reaching like a tree to the sky. Stretched up like that, he must have reached twenty feet.

Lightning crackled from a cloudless sky, brought forth from an invisible place. I shifted my gaze and observed the threads of power. Raurim drew power, but only from the faint emanations rising from nature—unlike a Mornae priestess, who could draw power out from the depths for others to consume. Still, it was a beautiful sight, how the power drifted down into the globe and ignited a light within it.

The Baikal supporting Yorl murmured as my master tied it to her belt with bloody hands, turning the bluish light black. Her own supporters grunted and stomped their feet. Hiltham, the Red Tusk, beamed and raised his fist, reaching as high as Raurim, and the power passed into him, sparking the two globes on his harness. More globes in the crowd ignited with hers.

Yorl sneered, but inside that thick chest, he seethed.

Drog told us later how the hunt had happened. There were three animals the Baikal considered a worthy hunt: Zelaugr, the great black wolf; Barona, the great mother bear, the largest bear of all bears; and Mahwir, the great boar of the forest. There were other hunts that earned respect—such as Shol, the great elk—but only one of those top three, or a great contest, could earn a globe. And war with a worthy adversary.

My master had been stealthy and clever while Yorl relied on his strength and power. She smelled Mahwir's broodling in the wind, anticipated his movements, and set a trap, spear in hand. It had taken all her strength to pierce the boar and bring it down.

Four Veikal dragged the carcass to the edge of Trosgan's porch as a gift to the chief and his pledges, but who would step forward to partake of his bounty?

My gaze lowered as my gift poured out. A careless, uncontrolled need to understand. Feelings swelled: rage and joy, anger and hatred. And then there was my master. I grasped for her feelings, and I swayed, lightheaded. A hand on my back steadied me. Loga.

My master stood tall, but there was pain in her muscles, a faint crack in the bone of her forearm where the broodling had smashed his head, and a tear in the muscle of her left leg. A day of rest would heal it. For today, she just needed to show strength and courage.

I tore myself from my master to probe the chief for answers. I could almost hear my mother's laughter over my poor effort to control my gift.

"Good, good," mumbled the chief, avoiding looking at the boar. Things were going his way, but he was impatient to realize his plan. Yorl should have gotten a globe first. The chief glanced at his son, anger on his face. He'd berate him in private later.

Earning a globe brought over more allies to my master. There were those who believed the omen, but also those of less power who thought her cleverness more important than brute strength. And she'd done it alone, too, a feat that even the bravest of them hadn't achieved at her age.

Yet, bad things often stalk the good. Yorl's anger seethed and spread to those who supported him.

When all had settled for the night, my master removed her hunting gear and left it for us to clean. I set a warm drink by her bed, infused with *leka* root to ease the pain. She didn't drink it.

I carried her hunting kit out to the backyard to wash it. Thralls brought buckets of water. I held the globe up to Cassan's faint light. There were markings on it, elegant letters not made by Baikal or Veikal.

"They're not from these parts," whispered one of the new thralls.

Startled, I gripped it in my hands, bloodying myself.

The thrall lowered herself to almost crouching, folded over in a strange bow. She motioned to the soiled kit, asked, "Forgive me. Can I help you, Dalis?"

We were both thralls, but she'd elevated me above them. She took it upon herself to broach the gap between me and all of them. I felt a pang of need for closeness, for humanity.

"Yes, the leather," I said.

The thralls bowed and helped by collecting more water. I instructed them on how to clean the leather, the silver, all of it, but they just nodded and went to work. I blushed when they started. They knew more than I did.

“What do you know about this?” I asked the thrall who’d commented on the globe. I held it up to the light again, so precious and so ordinary at once.

“Thuka knows them,” she said. I recalled Loga called this thrall *palja*. That meant *stunted* in Baikal. And she was a tiny thing. I’d have thought her a child, except for the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and the deep furrows crossing her forehead. She made me feel like a giant. She was Timoth’s favorite.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Mari, Dalis. I am called Mari by my people.”

“Who is Thuka?” I asked.

A woman, heavysset compared to the others, squared off like a stump, stepped closer.

“You are not afraid of me?” I asked them.

“Should we be, Dalis?” Mari asked.

“We don’t mean to offend you,” Thuka said.

“I’m not.” My face relaxed, smiling. I’d been relying on others’ fear of me for so long. “Do you know anything about this?” The globe sat in my palm, and my fingers could encompass it whole, overlapping at the tips. The glass had a blue tinge and seemed solid.

Thuka stepped closer. “They’re made by a people beyond my land, Dalis. In a great city over the Dragon’s Back—the high mountains near my homeland.”

Thuka seemed like any woman of the north, but Mari had a quality I’d not encountered before... except for in my mother. Deceptively delicate.

“How do you know?” I pressed Thuka. She seemed reluctant. I rode the crest of her feelings straight to her mind. She scratched the back of her head and waved to herself as she flushed hot. I didn’t care about her discomfort. I could taste the power I held over her,

and a Mornae craves nothing more than power. My mother held the Yatani in thrall through her very presence. It wasn't just in fear, they'd respected her, valued her. They'd thought her beautiful, the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen, and these women saw me that way too.

At that moment, I knew my mother again.

"Dalis, we will tell you whatever you need to know," Mari said, her head bowed. My power ebbed back from Thuka, and she let out a breath.

These people had knowledge of what I was doing, or at least a sense of it.

It was Thuka, protective of Mari, who spoke. "There is a place, Dalis, with cities the size of mountains. Not huts or villages, but miles and miles of stone towers reaching to the sky made by wizards. Great kings and empresses."

"Long ago," I said.

Thuka shook her head. "Eleven great cities on the sea. And smaller ones. All struggling against each other. Ancient ones and new. In Ithka, they make the globes. In Ahzhal, they make the steel."

"Steel?"

"The globe is not glass only, Dalis," Mari explained. "It only looks that way. It is crystal steel."

"They forge the glass with *boka* steel," Thuka said. "It can hold god-power. Kaumani raided us. Took our power to—"

"What power, Thuka?" I asked.

Her mouth tightened, but then relaxed. I forced myself onto her mind. She bobbed her head and once again I relented.

"We harvest silk from Ula's nests. The great spider? Do you know her?"

Ula must be their goddess, or something akin to it. I'd heard stories. The *ulas* weren't spiders, but their young appeared so. Then, they grew into large caterpillar-like creatures the size of cows that left swathes of web in their wake. The Mornae harvested a smaller version of them.

"And this silk has power?" I asked.

"After our holy people touch it, yes," Thuka answered. "They sold us to the Veikal for their rope, and Ahzhal sold them steel and their own people. The Ithkans forged the steel and glass into globes."

Thuka looked at Mari, but the woman kept her gaze low. Mari clamped down on her feelings. She had a stronger mind-fortress. From Thuka's feelings I intuited that Mari's own people had sold her into slavery. How far she'd come, despite her size. I admired her resolve. A mouse, Hendar would have said, and somehow she'd stayed alive. Both had.

"The Veikal asked for the *boka* steel," Thuka continued. "That's what they wanted."

"And the Veikal sell northern thralls?" I asked.

Mari nodded. "To work deep in the mines where the rock turns black."

I stood and turned from them. The Mornae were not the only ones who worked *kith*. I imagined dark caves filled with toiling slaves. My mind stretched open to a wider world.

"My city is a city of slaves, Dalis," Mari said. "People from all over. Not thralls like here, but slaves. Never a hope of freedom. The steel takes many hands and many years to make."

"What do they want this steel for?" I'd never seen steel among the Baikal, and only small pieces among the Yatani.

"To kill, Dalis," Mari said. "*Boka* steel can pierce thick hides and some metals. When I was a child, long before a lord of my city stole

me and sold me, a nearby city declared itself free of Ahzhal. They used weapons crafted from this steel to destroy them,” Mari added. “In ancient times, there were beasts in the mountains, terrifying ones. The great *dalis* of the age taught my ancestors how to craft the steel to defeat the creatures.”

I frowned. “Is the steel black?”

Thuka shook her head. Mari said, “It is gray, like your skin.”

“So, these Kaumani trade with Veikal and these cities. Thralls and slaves are the common currency?”

They nodded. My stomach tightened. What had Hendar intended for me before he’d gifted me to amend whatever wrong he’d done to Trosgan? A vast fortune awaited anyone who could take me far south. My hands curled to tight fists.

Thuka backed away. “There are no people like you, Dalis. Not that I have ever known or heard of.”

Shadows swirled at my feet. I calmed myself until they dissipated.

“Where is that man from?” I asked, looking over at a man working strips of leather. “Is he of your people?”

Thuka scoffed. “He’s a herder, from the plains. At least he has more than two thoughts in his head.”

I stifled a chuckle. “What other thoughts does he have?”

“He knows the winds,” Thuka said. “The seasons, the beasts. He can make a fine poison for bringing down the largest ones.”

“Keep that quiet,” I said.

They both nodded.

The world was so much larger than I’d realized. Mother taught me there were only two powers in the world—Alcar and Mornae—and they were the same people. Fifteen cycles of disagreement on the practice of power separated them. *Fifteen cycles*. That was how she’d thought. That was how far back my people remembered.

“These cities survived the Fall of Saylassa?” I asked.

Mari answered, “They have lived beyond the Dragon’s Back since before the stars fell from the sky, Dalis. Forever.”

I smiled at them. The Baikal spoke about *forever*, but it only meant the time beyond their grandparents.

“Do you have any power?” I asked them.

They snickered.

“No, Dalis,” Thuka said. “I was a weaver of silk. All the power was Ula’s.”

I turned to Mari, who said, “No, Dalis. I have none.”

Thuka shook her head. “She has the words and letters of several cities, Dalis. She made trouble for herself by writing stories about the Za’al empress.”

“You’re a poet?”

Mari nodded.

“She’s a historian, Dalis. An eminent scholar.”

“Why would they sell you, then?” I asked.

Thuka chuckled. “Because she’s a *historian*, Dalis.”

I must have looked confused, so Mari explained.

“In our homelands, the word is just as dangerous as a sword. Historians and poets are the most feared people. Like you, Dalis. You speak a god-word, and the Baikal listen. It is the same in our lands with poets and historians. They send those like me away, especially when there is a change in the king’s line or a defeat... or even a victory.”

I hesitated to ask the obvious.

Thuka explained, “They don’t kill them because that would upset the Fates, and a historian is a child of the Fates. Very complicated, Dalis.”

I nodded. Just as strange as the north lands.

“You will teach me,” I ordered them, wanting to know everything. And then I flushed hard along the jaw. I’d issued a command like I was their master.

Mari didn’t seem bothered by it, however, and bowed her head.

“Dalis, we need better clothes,” Thuka said, her hands open on her lap in supplication. “The cold.”

“Does the earth god steal your heat?” I asked.

They shook their heads. That, at least, was a relief. The north had a different cold than their lands. Here, the earth god took hold of a person’s warmth, ripped it right out no matter how heavy his garments, hoarding it for the Dark Goddess and her people. What these thralls felt was the simple cold that even Baikal suffered.

“I will get you warmer clothes,” I said. “And I want you both to promise me something.”

They drew close.

“Only speak to me. Not to any other thrall or Veikal. Trust no one. I will keep you safe, but you must stay out of the Baikal’s way, and that of the Veikal. A sadness fills them.”

They agreed, but my heart fluttered, fearful for them.

“Mari, you will start by telling me what the words on the globe are.”

She looked unimpressed. “It is just a light globe, but with a different intention.”

“Made for the Baikal?” I pressed.

She nodded. “They store power summoned by the shamans, and the Baikal speak the word to draw it out.”

But the power wasn’t in the word. The word was just a focal point for the Baikal’s will, and, for Baikal, intention meant rage. Intention put power in the globe and intention brought it out, according to the summoner’s power—according to what their minds and bodies could

withstand. All powers had a sharp, lethal edge, waiting to crush the inexperienced or weak.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Questions swirled in my mind, and yet I felt armed to further probe the chief. I hadn't even thought to give his plan any merit, to think beyond this village. The world was so much larger than I'd thought. My people might be decaying, but others in the world were rising.

Cities. I'd never seen a city, and to me the word meant the same as Vaidolin, the only city my mother had known—or that she'd told *me* about.

The steel, though. It was not *kithaun*. Only a Mornae could make that steel, and it had to be of the purest ore—only found in Vaidolin.

I knew so little about Vailassa or its peoples, even though my goddess traversed its length, ruling it every ten days. Veins of *kith* pulsed beneath the ground, running all along the length and breadth of Vailassa. All the way to the Dragon Lands, it went, and beyond. So far away, like a black whisper, that I lost track of it.

My chest warmed. I wanted to protect these new thralls, to claim them as my people.

But to do so, I needed to learn more about the world to serve my master better.

To preserve myself, and these women. All of them.

The enmity between the twins only increased over the following years. Every day they didn't end each other seemed a miracle to me.

I lived from day to day struggling to make my gift useful to my master, but it only became more unwieldy.

The night before the twins' elder-day, marking their twentieth year and my twenty-ninth, I sat with Loga on the porch on the edge of the chief's yard. Yorl glowered at my master from the other fire. I didn't need to peer into the shadows masking his face to feel what was inside him. He hated her for having been born with him, for taking half the chieftain's rise, for making him beholden to old shamans rattling bones and spewing smoke.

The shamans of hill, beast, and wood continued warning all who would listen, even the chieftain and his son, not to provoke Aelath or else she would whisper to her dark sister—the moon goddess, Vai. Vai would curse them all with daemon attacks and heinous magic the likes of which they had never seen. There was a desolation nearby where they claimed blue fire had rained down from the sky and devoured everything below.

They had to keep doing this because as they got older, the twins diverged, my master becoming womanly, something *desirable*.

My master had kept pace with Yorl until they'd turned sixteen, but then he'd shot up like an ironwood and grown out like an oak, thick muscle strapping around his branches and trunk. If he lived long enough, if he survived the violence, he might one day shrink back to a wrought-iron form and become a shaman, listening to the spirits and gods on behalf of the tribe. I doubted Yorl would ever achieve that though. Someone would do him in, or he would be chief and rule with a bloody hand.

I knew the names of all who hated him, no matter what face they gave to others. Hatred, bloodlust, desire, joy, it felt the same in my breast. I was desperate, but I read every new Baikal who crossed my path, seeking to know whether they were friend or foe to my master. The constant flow of sensations overwhelmed me. I seemed half-awake most times, trying to hold and sort it all.

"You're in a haze," Loga whispered. "Stop that swaying." She meant well, and she was right. I craved to know, to root out the venom of chaos and disagreement. I couldn't afford to have anyone see me like this—Yorl, especially.

Yorl sulked as Hiltham, my master's favorite, roared with laughter. I wanted to feel Hiltham's joy, but there was something of greater concern in Yorl that I needed to uncover. He'd been swirling the same bit of ale in his mug for an hour.

Hiltham was his major rival in the contests and, like my master, had more globes than Yorl. There was even talk that Hiltham and my master would be the new Barka and Aelath. He respected her enough to teach her what he knew and take her on hunts. The Reds, though fewer in number than the Black Wolf, still had the power of their ancestors. Their solicitude for my master only stoked Yorl's rage.

Hiltham laughed again, his deep voice filling the yard.

Yorl rose, his mass carving out a deep shadow against the flames, and cast his wooden mug into the fire.

His followers raised mugs to him, offering him their own, but he waved them away.

“Tomorrow is the hunt,” he said. “I will bring down all the gods’ children.”

They nodded, but didn't give any other sign of support. He'd only earned one globe to my master's four. The solitary globe dangled from the harness framing his massive chest.

“You'll all see,” he said to them, but their enthusiasm didn't rise to the level he wanted.

Those sitting at my master's fire chuckled.

He growled and stomped off into the darkness.

I let out a deep breath.

“You need to rest from that,” Loga reminded me. She must have realized I was up to something, and not hiding it very well. “You'll break someday.”

If my master didn't rest, what right had I? She'd learned to loosen up more, to enjoy being with her people, but she always strategized. Those who hated Yorl found favor with her. She wrestled with them, sparred with them, and found pleasure with them. His hatred of her, his jealousy, only increased. I sometimes thought to speak with her like a mother, to convince her to be at peace with him. *Let him bluster! Let him win!*

But I think even then, deep down, my master scared me more than he did, for he was a known thing.

My master rose, bidding her folk a good night and a good hunt on the morrow. It pleased them when she spoke to them, and they cheered her on. Others rose and lumbered off to their own huts.

“I'll get the water,” Loga said. “You prepare her kit.”

I nodded, but stood at the entrance to the hut. The watchmen took their places by the fire, kicking away the refuse left behind by the revelers.

I prayed to my goddess that my master should live another day. I didn't know why I prayed—it was not a Mornae custom—but the Baikal often asked their gods for things. A shiver ran through me with an echo of the feelings I'd known that evening. Something burrowed in me like a splinter.

I was in the back of the hut, ensuring that all the buckles were well-oiled, when it happened.

The hide curtains framing my master's section of the hut fell, torn away like cobwebs. A mass of shadow loomed over us. I shrank against the wall near the back entrance, hidden by stacks of furs. The back door's heavy flap was down to block out the wind, but I could push through it to escape.

My master stood, pointing at the front entrance. "Get out."

"You know what Father wants." His face was in shadow, his voice deep and soft. Yorl was trying to sound reasonable.

"I'll see who I want."

"You'll bed whoever we want."

"Get. Out."

His lips twisted. "By the gods, woman!" he bellowed, unable to contain himself much longer. "You're the daughter of Aelath! Isn't that enough?" His frustration mixed with rage; his fists clenched tight.

"I'll sit the rise." And by *sit*, she meant *rule*. She would be more than a symbol, a political game piece.

He growled, desperate because she would not yield to him.

“Maybe I’ll have you, then!” he yelled. “What do you think of that? Think of *our* children! Ruling all Vailassa.”

He’d let it slip. Trosgan had grand, if not twisted, ambitions. Yorl cursed himself for speaking it.

“I have no need for all Vailassa.”

He roared, snorted, and stomped the hard-packed floor, cracking it. I shook with each step. Goddess above, the rage! I feared for her.

“I’ll have *you*, at least!”

My heart sank, leaving me light-headed and swaying. My vision shifted, looking to the Dark fluttering through the chamber. I’d summon the fire to destroy him. I’d not let him touch her.

“The gods will curse you,” my master said in a low voice. “Hear it now, brother. Take one more step.”

“Your relic isn’t here. I do not fear Aelath like the others do.”

But I *was* there, and I cursed him in my heart.

He pushed the large table away, sending it crashing against the wall, showering all that had been sitting on it throughout that side of the hut. I inched farther away behind a thick pillar.

Flesh struck flesh, a powerful blow. My goddess didn’t hesitate to rise in me despite my years of trying to keep her contained. Shadows swelled to protect me, but it was my little power that flowed out, ravenous. Lust, hatred, anger... they all melded into one. Muscle, blood, breath... their movements and feelings rumbled through me.

More blows followed. Screeches and whimpers. Groans and thuds. The furnishings crashed and crumbled beneath the twins’ weight. I covered my head, pressing myself into the gap between two large beams of the wall. Hundreds of pounds were striking, falling, crashing. The hut threatened to collapse.

Through a gap in the debris, I saw his face, all red and sweaty. His frustration had reached a point of confusion. He was failing, and he knew it. He growled at her, anguished and desperate.

Just as she'd been yoked to me, he'd been yoked to her.

"You'll do what I want," he said, voice choked. He dodged a blow and the debris shifted, blocking my view again.

I crammed myself behind another pillar. The ironwood beams overhead shook and creaked as the twins fought. Dust and soot rained down from the thatched ceiling as the place shuddered. My forearm burned as if cracked open. I covered my mouth and tears flowed over my hands. Pain seared me. Whose bone had broken, I couldn't tell. I grasped my side as a new pain radiated through my chest.

One of them was rummaging for something. I dared stand to look, grasping myself as if wounded.

My master was searching the shambles for a weapon.

I lost my wits then, unable to concentrate and gather my power. I couldn't believe what was happening.

She meant to kill him.

She tore through the debris and raised a mallet used to crack hard seeds, holding it high as if to break open his head.

"Master!" I cried out, forgetting my place. "Remember the god-word!" The words had hissed out of me, strangled. I'd wanted to say, "Remember the rise!" but I didn't want to stoke his rage. Yorl groped along the floor, holding his rib where she'd kneed him. He crawled on a cracked forearm.

My master looked at me, her face streaked with sweat, tears, and blood. He'd torn out a chunk of her hair, and blood ran freely down the left side of her face. Her nostrils flared. The rage in her was like

nothing I'd known. All she'd suppressed for all these years rose like the sea to the cliff side.

She shoved him and grabbed his only globe, ripping it free of the harness, and with one quick, powerful blow, she struck it with the hammer. It didn't shatter like I'd expected. Chips of it flew outward, smashed, so that it was no longer a sphere. He snarled and barked a curse at her.

She tossed the mallet aside and struck his face with her open hand, fingers curled like she had claws. Her fingers raked his skin. He may have been like iron to others, but to her power, he was like any other man. He scrambled away, holding his face, and she thrashed him. She clung to his frame, grappling with him, mauling him. Despite his greater size, her will was greater. He'd come looking to intimidate her, and she made sure he'd never forget this night.

Yorl scrambled out of her hut, sprawling out into the yard. The watchmen rose then, calling out. There'd be a crowd soon enough.

I came out of hiding. My master stood at the door with her back to me, heaving. She wiped her face and took deep, trembling breaths. Her hands clenched as a low roar built up in her, but she didn't let it out. She wouldn't give Yorl the satisfaction.

She looked enormous to me.

At the back entrance, Loga stood frozen. I waved her back to wait until my master's rage had passed.

"Water," I whispered. "And towels."

Loga and the other women ran off.

I didn't move until my master did. Her rage was too hot.

Loga and the others reappeared. My master turned then, looking about at the destruction. She started picking things up.

"Master, we'll do that for you," I said.

She glanced at me, her eyes ringed in darkness, grim.

Loga handed me a bucket of water and linens.

“Stay there,” I whispered to the women. I set the bucket down and searched through the wreckage for ointment. My master sat on the edge of her bed, a thick stack of hides and furs. She shook, her hands gripping her thighs so tightly they left marks. I waited until she settled, the tension in her muscles relaxing, before approaching. I knelt beside her with the ointment, clean water, and linens.

“Leave that,” she instructed. I nodded and placed the linen and ointment beside her. Her nails trapped his skin, his blood, his black hairs. I shivered and looked away.

“Tell Hiltham that my bed is cold. At midnight, he must warm it.”

I didn’t respond.

“Go,” she commanded me. Loga and the others entered to clean up the mess.

I nodded, not knowing how I’d give such an order to Hiltham. I ran outside with fear in my chest. The fires of the second watch blazed, and only the guards milled about. They glanced at me. No one in the yard could have been deaf to the racket. Across the yard, Yorl sat at his usual place. His allies were gathering around him.

I’d never gone deeper into the village before. Timoth and Jorn were in bed, not thinking I’d need them at night.

Hiltham was a young elder of twenty-three years and had no hut of his own yet. He shared one with two others of his age. I stood outside his hut and called out to him. Creaking branches drowned out my voice. A wind had risen—an omen. I called out again. It was a dark, starlit night, and he startled to see me there with my white hair aglow in the darkness.

“Barka!” he roared, and I trembled inside. His joviality faded. This was a side of him I’d never seen before. My jaw tightened.

I must keep control of my fear.

Like the giants who'd fought my mother, he called out to all the gods. A giant of his size, I couldn't understand why he feared me. I was a sliver of flesh compared to him, but slivers can hurt giants. Especially those favored by a dark goddess. He reached inside for his weapon, but I soothed his fears.

"Do not fear, Hiltham. I am here to speak a god-word for you."

His calls to the gods lessened. He stood there, out of breath, eyes bulging. When his fear reduced to a simmer, I spoke my master's words.

"My master's bed is cold. You must warm it at midnight."

He blinked hard. "*Me?*"

I knew the desire of his heart and of his loins. My master wasn't lovely by Mornae standards. To him, though, she was a goddess.

"Yes, Hiltham. The goddesses have spoken your name."

My words must have sounded like sweet music to him, because his head tilted back and his eyes lit up. He growled with pleasure.

"At the midnight hour," I said.

He was there at midnight. My master's moans of pleasure were loud and unmistakable. The entire village must have heard. The hut's walls shuddered.

I sat outside near the night watch's fire, with Loga and the rest of my master's household around me. When my master finished with Hiltham, in the second hour of the new day, she commanded me to give the same word to Womtha the White, a twenty-year-old, white-haired and white-eyed Baikal of the Zelaugr. Unlike Hiltham, Womtha bounded toward her hut at once, white hair loose and wild, leaving me speaking the words behind him.

By now, the village was stirring for the early morning hunt to celebrate the twins' twentieth birthday. They sat around the fire laughing and chuckling to the sounds coming from her hut.

Yorl, sitting with them, his scratches and bruises fading, seethed.

Womtha came out pink and flushed. He roared and laughed to the heavens. "Glorious goddess, Aelath, I pledge myself to you!"

Everyone around him laughed, jealous of the favor he'd received.

When my master finished with Womtha, she had me speak the words to Fain, a Zelaugr elder with a bad leg.

Fain sat at a fire with the older Baikal who'd little tolerance for Yorl's brashness. Three others sat at Fain's fire, and they kept their gazes low as I approached. They were all older, with dozens of globes, claws, and teeth dangling from their harnesses and belts. All of them were near the time of their departure to the tombs or to the shamans. I made my way around them, each one of them hoping I'd stop by him and speak the word.

"Fain, Son of Burr," I said, hands to my shoulders to make it clear for whom I spoke.

He shook his head. "There must be a mistake, Dalis."

I thought he must be defective, but he was not. He only doubted his strength to fight the chief should Trosgan take offense.

"Fain, the daughter of Aelath, admires your courage and honor. They are second to none."

His eyes widened, but he didn't look Yorl's way. Still, he shook his head.

"Fain, Son of Burr," I said more forcefully, "you must warm her bed. She awaits you. Do you keep the goddess waiting?"

It was brash to speak that way. Raurim would have hissed at me, but they all believed what I'd said. I'd just given voice to their deepest thoughts about my master.

Still, I pressed him. I had a command to fulfill. “What the goddess offers, no sane man would deny.”

Deep murmurs ran through the Baikal behind me. Those at Fain’s fire, tried and tested warriors, urged him to go.

There were few secrets in a Baikal village. Everyone must know what Yorl had done—a terrible thing to perpetrate on a daughter of Aelath. But they feared his rage, and the chieftain grew old. The twins would fight for the rise; everyone thought it, despite what the shamans had ordained.

I was in the middle of a political contest. They were taking sides in the yard. Baikal shifted from fire to fire. More sat with Hiltham and Womtha.

Yorl stewed in his anger. He dared not speak or contest their loyalty, lest anyone mention what he’d done. They’d keep his shame, but not give him what he needed most.

So, Fain rose, strong of arm but hobbling, and he crossed the center of the yard. The eyes of those he passed fixed on him. Wide with amazement, but also envy. He seemed to grow in stature as he walked, finding his strength.

I sat by the flap to the hut and waited. The fire’s logs crackled and snapped. Except for the deep breaths of the Baikal, there was silence in the village. When the sun crested the top of the eastern peaks, Fain emerged, his eyes sparkling and pleased.

“Aelath is indeed glorious,” he said with a soft voice. All the Baikal around his fire agreed. They, too, pledged themselves.

After that night, she continued to invite Yorl’s rivals to her bed—the strongest first, and then others, until sated. At first, I thought it was out of spite to wound Yorl’s pride, but she’d discovered something about herself. Another source of power. And she was voracious. She gave no sign to them whether she liked any of them

or intended to name one of them her mate. Though, as she'd hoped, they talked about their time with her. It was not her first political maneuver, but it left her with a dozen staunch allies, ready to fight for her.

Yorl hated her even more. He was like the small-minded Baikal who'd fought my mother; not like Hendar or even the chief.

The twins had fought from the womb, and through their youth, and into adulthood. Their fate was a binding they both resented, and while I was proud of my master, proud to be of her household, I feared for her.

I feared for myself.

The twins sat in moots from then on, and went on clan hunts and raids. And on every occasion, they competed. My master could have just let Yorl win. The oracle had secured her place. But she *wouldn't* let him win. It wasn't her nature. It was not Aelath's way to surrender. The winds go where they will.

I'd grown up seeing myself as the most coveted playing piece, but it was all more complicated than that.

One day, we were walking through the village to the forge, my master in the lead, with Loga and me behind her. Yorl's people stalked us, taunting us, looking for any occasion to earn his favor by hurting my master. Her warriors and hunters fanned out, and a train of thralls trailed behind me. My little power flowed through them, binding them to me like a delicate web.

With our show of strength, I was sure none would dare attack.

But they did.

"*Draka!*" someone screamed behind us.

"*Witch!*"

Bone cracked. A shudder of pain screeched through me. My eyes widened. A gasp lodged in my throat, and then there was emptiness where before there had been a gentle grace.

Mari.

I stopped, gaping in silence, all composure lost. A cry climbed up from my chest. Shadows licked at my calves and bristled at my fingertips. My master turned and looked from my face to the back of the train. Her nostrils flared, her rage building to strike out and destroy. Her warriors charged to her side, but she held up a fist. They stopped, snorting and shaking their heads, rage swelling in them.

Mari was so slight, with the body of a child. The crack of her skull still sang in the air—or the sound had lodged itself in me. That echo would be with me forever. It had taken so little to kill her.

How I longed for a blade. Any blade.

Hadn't I warned Mari? Hadn't I done everything possible to protect her?

No, I'd wanted her—so lovely and fine—to come along in the entourage, but I'd left her alone in the back.

I read my master's face instead of turning. I feared what I would do if I turned.

"A witch!" one of Yorl's bedmates screamed behind me. Others chimed in, claiming the same.

"That thrall spoke spells!"

"A southern witch!"

"I lost a child. The future chief!" Yorl's bedmate went on and on, claiming she'd housed the seed of Rothmin for three months. That Yorl would soon declare her his woman. She screamed about ghosts in the night and spirits skulking about Yorl's hut. She spat out the word *daemon* often. Fear rose through the gathering crowd, as it often did at the mention of spirits, even amongst my master's people.

"Call those of the hill!" one woman cried. "Call them to witness!"

"Witch!"

The word hissed through the crowd. To a Baikal, a witch was an abomination, a whisperer to the dead, to evil spirits lurking in every shadow waiting to steal their children, or their food, even their very breaths. Among the Yatani, witches had been healers, but here the name was as bad as *daemon*.

My master relaxed. I wanted her to cut them all down. I wanted blood, but she made her calculation and determined her next move.

She couldn't ignore the accusation of witchcraft. It could spill over to me. She didn't want the shamans involved at the risk of them speaking a word against her.

Stunned, I sought in vain for a sign that my friend lived. Yes, my friend. A friend I'd allowed to die. Mari had powers, small ones, but none that could harm. I doubted she'd taken it upon herself to harm Yorl's woman. But standing there now, with the echo of her pain washing through me, I wondered if I'd missed something. I'd never noticed, never considered the loyalty of the other thralls to my master. Yorl's attack had angered her household. I'd just considered our bonded fate and not hers with the others who wore her token. She'd earned their respect for not being as brutal as the other Baikal.

My master's eyes lowered, and she said something to Loga. Jaw clenched, Loga nodded and then barked for someone to remove the body. There'd be no demand for a thrall-price. She'd read the crowd. She needed their superstition to serve her.

My eyes widened, unbelieving, fixated on the hem of her tunic, the pattern of flowers and beasts from an unfamiliar land woven together in the loveliest pattern. It had taken Mari months to harvest enough moth cocoons from the forest for that pattern. We'd all helped her, even the surly hunters.

My mind and heart screamed: *Rage! Rage now! Show them! Why not now?*

I thought for sure that my master would destroy Mari's killers, that she'd unleash her mighty rage, for Mari... for *me*.

What a fool I was. Still.

Instead, my master grunted and turned back to the path forward. The entourage followed.

I felt like I would break. All the feelings stored in me, all the cries and pleas, threatened to erupt. My heart. My heart was crushed at last.

Goddess above, I thought. My body trembled. The women snickered and chuckled as one of my master's men carried Mari's body.

Loga turned and motioned to me. Vilki ran back to fetch me. "Now, Dalis. You *must* move now." She hissed at Yorl's women.

"Go on now, Vilki," Yorl's bedmate said. "Run to your pledge. Mine will sit the rise."

It was inane, illogical, what she'd said. Everyone knew the twins must sit the rise together. I hated all of it, all of them, at that moment, but I knew Vilki was right.

I moved one foot, and then another, my steps moving along the winding Dark.

I walked in a daze for the rest of that day. The others filled in for me. If I offended my master, she gave no sign.

Later that night, I held the writings Mari had made, tracing the beautiful lettering with my finger. All the stories of her people.

I couldn't read them. I'd only just started learning the letters.

Thuka sat beside me, weeping as if she'd lost a child. It was only then that I realized Mari had been older than both of us. A woman with a family of her own, and children, even. I'd recorded her life without appreciating her.

How selfish I'd been. I held Thuka's hand.

Someone hissed from the doorway. “Dalis?”

Vilki.

I hunched over. Couldn’t they leave me to my sorrow?

“Please, Dalis. Master will turn angry. She needs you to speak the god-word before Timoth fights.”

Timoth? He’d been one of our guards when Mari and I had foraged in the wood.

I rose.

“Now, Dalis. Come!”

I left Thuka to weep for both of us.

In the chief’s yard, fires burned on the north and south sides, but in the center stood Timoth and Wender, one of Yorl’s men.

Timoth was furious, twisting the haft of his axe in his hands.

My master stood to the side. She held her own axe across her hips, and I made my way to the butt side of the weapon.

“Timoth, speak your complaint,” my master said.

Timoth tensed, restraining his rage, if only out of respect for my master. He glared at Yorl’s woman, the one who’d called Mari a witch and who’d cracked her skull. “That woman called the thrall...” he couldn’t very well name her, but his heart ached with it, “... a witch. She *wasn’t*. She was a daughter of Forthai. I know it to be true. The gods know it is true.”

Forthai was the goddess of herbs and the shadowy secrets of the forest. She was the mate of Melka, lord of the forest. They invoked her at births, before and after battles.

Wender wasn’t sure what to say. Usually, whoever made the first god-claim won, and Timoth had two god-words supporting him—my master and myself. And, once accepted, the only outcome was for Wender to pay. The woman may have kept Yorl company as a

bedmate, but she was under Wender's rule. More than that, she was his daughter.

"What do you want for the dead thrall?" Wender asked.

Timoth looked ready to hack him to pieces.

"Your pledge," my master said.

Wender blinked, and a grin broke out on his face when she repeated it. "That's what I've wanted all along, Aelaku."

I'd not paid attention to Wender before. He'd always sat at Yorl's fire.

"But not her," my master said, glancing at the woman who'd killed Mari. "You must cut her loose." It didn't matter that the woman was Wender's daughter.

Wender raised his hands to the sky. "I do not know her, Aelaku." And with those words, she became a no one, a Veikal without a clan, tribe, or claim. A Veikal born of a Baikal had esteem and was a potential mate to them. But now she was nothing.

That vile woman came screeching out of the crowd, and Timoth's axe arced across, forward, and then back, cutting her clear through into chunks. The body toppled, and the head—the neck and half a shoulder—tumbled along the ground.

"*Aeth kalle*," Timoth muttered.

"*Now, the sky is clear*," were the words I thought of. Now, there could be peace between them all. For the Baikal, it was best to do away with an offensive person or thing rather than negotiate around it.

Wender stared at the body, and Yorl's women shrieked. It was not common to slay Veikal this way, but it was the Baikal way of justice. Cryptic to most, but my people also had strange ways of dealing with offenses.

I sensed no move in Wender to fight Timoth. The dead woman was a stranger to him, even though she'd been his daughter ten breaths ago.

My master remained where she was and let Wender walk to her, his hands open in peace. He held out his arm to her, his offer of a pledge.

"Wender," she said, "the thrall produced cloth from moth castoffs. You and your people will gather ten buckets after every hatching until you die." He frowned, but it was the payment for all Mari's services. My master was exacting. There'd been a death, and now a lifetime of service to repay. She didn't grasp his arm yet.

"And ten buckets of yellow flowers, and ten buckets of blue. For inks," she added.

His hand remained firm, waiting for her. "Anything else?"

Her axe fell away, and she grasped his arm. She pulled him close. "Keep your people in order."

He nodded.

And that was it. Priceless Mari bartered away for power in the twins' struggle.

My heart turned to stone in my chest.

Later that night, I stood by the flap of my master's room. I wanted to speak my mind. My mother's echoes were driving me.

"Come away, Dalis," Vilki whispered. "Come to bed."

But I could not silence the rush of questions. Why had she not acted for Mari? I squeezed my eyes until they ached.

"Come here," my master said from the other side of the flap.

My eyes widened, and Vilki's face sagged as if an executioner had summoned me. I rubbed my eyes and pulled the flap open.

My master sat on the edge of her bed, a massive shadow. She'd gotten so big, filling out. Streams of moonlight cut across the space, and I avoided standing in one, preferring the shadows.

"Hold out your hands," she said, her gaze low.

I did so, holding my hands as still as I could, but they trembled anyway.

She looked from my hands to my face, and I looked up at her. The shadows couldn't hide the pain etched into her face. Her eyes shone like two specks of glass at the end of deep tunnels, as if she meant to hide them from me. I couldn't look away, and my breath caught in my throat.

"Your goddess must wait her turn," she said.

I bowed my head. I'd let shadows rise in me out in public. It could have been much worse for us. I'd prevented my master from striking out. My response forced her to think of my safety first. I should have felt special, valued, but instead I felt responsible, a hindrance. I was the older of us, but she'd proved much more astute. She'd had to be.

She took a leather pouch from her belt and placed it in my hands. I didn't need to open it. Inside were her thrall tokens. She still only wore mine—like a charm. She didn't like the burden of thralls, so she gave them to me while Mari's death was fresh in our minds.

"Carry it," she said, pointing at my belt. "So, all can see."

I'd only played at caring for the thralls, like a mother preoccupied with safeguarding her own feelings, but their value to my master was now in my care. I didn't want the burden either, but I had no choice.

"Find more like that one. To make silk."

It pained me that she didn't say Mari's name. Maybe she didn't know it, but she seemed brought low, which was so unusual for her. I felt close to her again, as I had when she'd been a babe in her crib. We shared a common pain.

"Yes, master."

She straightened, her face rose to the trickle of moonlight streaming in through the vents in the roof. "Hunters will guard you. Speak a word and let them take care of it. Your goddess must wait her turn."

I wanted to apologize, to explain that it was natural for the shadows to rise to defend me, that my goddess did as she willed. Instead, I bowed my head again and tied the pouch to my belt.

She let out a snarl, her hands tightening to fists. My little power sought her. Goddess above! It took me so long to master it. Wave after wave of anger rushed through me. Another thrall might have collapsed from fear. Another thrall might have screamed and

screached. But I was not like the others, and I stood as my mother had at the cave mouth.

My master snorted, letting her rage settle, and stretched her hands out. Then she rested them on her knees. She puffed out a deep breath and then issued me a command: "Fain at midnight. I'll wash."

"Yes, master."

I left her there, even after all our time together, a mystery to me. I dared not seek deeper. Her wounds, her pains, were her own.

Loga, Vilki, and Dormu sat at the hearth, whispering.

"Our master will wash," I said. "Fain will come at midnight."

They noticed the pouch, of course. The firelight contorted their already misshapen faces, and I couldn't tell if it pleased them for me to receive this power.

I'd become the steward of my master's household. Not even Loga had reached that position.

But my master had done it to burden me further. It was no favor she had given me. I'd carried all the thralls' feelings, though. Why not their tokens? Their fates were now bound up with the oracle I'd spoken.

I thought Loga would be angry or disappointed, but a huge grin broke out on her face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"She can have her mate now," Dormu said. "She's not in charge."

I'd never even considered that. There was so much I felt, and yet so little that I noticed or knew about any of them. I drowned in their feelings so I could know nothing else. I held onto them long after they had passed, along with my own and all that had gone before. I'd expected Loga's anger, but there was only joy. What other things had I gotten wrong until that day?

And so many after.

I doubted myself and everything I knew up to that point.

“The wash,” I reminded them. My tone was different now. I’d commanded them. Dormu nodded and went off to warm the water. She didn’t flinch or resist, she just did it.

“Vilki, do you have a mate?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

Loga chuckled. “A line of idiots waits for her. Even a Baikal or two.”

Neither prospect seemed good to me, though Baikal like Timoth had earned my esteem over the years.

“I will speak to Fain,” I said, remembering my duty.

Outside, I found my guards already waiting—four of them with torches lit, all stout and experienced.

“What is your signal, Dalis?” asked Malgog, the eldest of them, his face dour but with a sparkle in his eyes, like he was laughing.

I held up two fingers together, the sign of the spear.

He nodded. “Good one. What if you just want to rough up?”

“You’ll know if you listen.” He’d need to watch me, learn from me, as my master’s other men watched her every move, listened to her every word, grunt, and snort, waiting for the sign to act.

He grunted. I’d use my gift more actively from then on. I’d start with these men sworn to protect me. Like sorcerers imbued *kithaun*, I’d impress my will on these men. Maybe if I’d been braver with my talents, I could have saved Mari.

The other guards nodded like they understood, and they did. Hunters knew how to wait, no matter the heights of rage bubbling up in them. My master had again shown her wisdom in giving me such men as guards.

I pressed down on the echo of Mari's pain. This newfound authority preoccupied me and seemed to awaken a different self, long dormant. It should have surprised me how easily I assumed this new power, but it didn't. I was Mornae, and a would-be matron. A matron holds the power of life and death in her house.

The power pleased me.

"We go to Fain's," I said.

They walked in a square about me, their spears shining in the torchlight. As we walked, I decided then to perfect my gift—the most Mornae thing to desire. Otherwise, I'd drown, and my master with me.

I repeated the words of the oracle, setting the intention in my heart and mind like an enchantment. I needed all the strength I could muster.

Over the next two years, Chief Trosgan paid my master immense sums—entire rings from his arms, and sometimes stretches of them—to have me stand by him. At the festivals and moots, I'd speak the god-word along with every shaman he could muster, reminding them of the fate declared over twenty years ago. There were clans that still did not accept it. There was such deep-seated fear and superstition, but they did not want what Trosgan wanted.

The chief used superstition as a tool, but it often turned on him. These Baikal were like their god, the sea. Their being ever changeable, angry, and crashing against the cliffs was the only thing the chief could count on.

Somehow, I navigated that sea. Or it carried me away.

No matter how often or how much he paid my master to make use of her trinket, the Baikal resisted his efforts to unite them all under his rule, that of a single chief. They preferred their ways.

I couldn't help but sympathize with them.

New thralls arrived every season, but my master only kept one or two, if any. I'd add their tokens to the pouch and take them under my wing, as was my duty. There were Yatani from villages I'd never heard of, yet they spoke the same words and wove the same cloth.

They clung to me, and I kept them huddled at my skirts. Their ages didn't matter to me; they were like my children, and I taught them what I could. Word must have reached them about my mother, and they knew not to fear me. I was their *dalis*, and my gift blanketed them, soothing them and creating peace.

I had learned through my study of the Baikal that I could predict their movements. I'd sink into the sensations their bodies produced, ignoring the heady emotions and thoughts. I extended that knowledge to those around me, pressing my power into them with my need to protect them. In this way, I kept most from a premature death. There were always those who resisted. When a giant maimed or killed one, I reminded myself that they were not of my people.

You cannot be a matron by force. Not for long, anyway.

Either way, my care of them was useful because the Yatani were skillful. Thuka had taken charge, directing their labor to free me to focus on more important things. This served me well. I needed more time to rest and replenish myself. I counted three hundred folk that I knew well enough for my power to influence. The burden of them swelled me like an overfull waterskin. I could barely think a thought of my own.

My master had reached her full height of thirteen feet. She was in her twenties, a full elder, and she could wrangle with the others for pledges, land, thralls, and more. The Reds supported her, and in most cases, she could count on the shamans. So, she turned her gaze to those Zelaugr who might back her.

One day, she led her entourage of warriors, Veikal, and thralls through the pathways between the huts and fenced compounds of the Zelaugr's main village.

More villages had sprouted around Rothmin's Stead and to the very edges of the plains. Melka's shamans had needed convincing

before they'd allowed cutting down any trees to make room. It had pleased them when Trosgan issued an oath that the ironwoods in the valleys beyond the rise belonged to them alone. It was an absurd oath, but it had made them happy for a time.

We headed to an ironwood forger of renown. Gorik was his name, and he was well-respected for his skill and teaching. Word had reached us that Yorl had struck one of Gorik's smiths, maiming him. Yorl did not repay Gorik, blaming the smith for an ill-fitted axe haft. Maybe Yorl was right. The axe-head had become loose at the unluckiest moment. Gorik descended from Black Boar, and still held those sympathies. Yorl, and then the chief, had questioned the man's loyalty at a moot, creating difficulty for him and his trade.

My master often sought those Baikal or Veikal injured or mistreated by her twin or the chief. It seemed a strange way to gain supporters since, according to the shamans, she and Yorl were of one flesh, but she wanted pledges of her own.

Gorik had a large forge with smoke rising from multiple covered furnaces, thralls working side by side with his household. He looked like ironwood himself. Soot covered a dented, pock-marked face. Hair didn't grow well on his head, as burns and scars covered it. Bad healing had left one arm crooked. He was big for a Veikal, more proportional than most. He held a large iron-headed hammer.

"I'm busy here," he grunted, hammering a rod of blood-red iron.

He'd scars; old wounds where a Baikal had struck him, by accident or not. A typical story. And while he held the familiar resentments of a Veikal, his were deeper, and now intransigent.

"I heard the chief cut you off," my master said. She stood with her thumbs hooked on her belt. Twin axes hung at her sides. Tonn carried her hammer.

"What if he has?" Again, he battered the iron.

“He’ll cast you off this land without a liege.”

Gorik stopped, glaring at her. His workers all hesitated, so he barked orders for them to continue working. His arm quaked with each blow to the iron.

“They’ll go first,” she said. I imagined Yorl charging through there, knocking these thralls and Veikal aside, destroying all that talent and skill with raging blows.

“The axe handle was sound,” Gorik said. He grimaced. “I check each one myself.”

“You think this was about axe handles?”

“You think your Reds will back you when the time comes?”

A Red, one of Hiltham’s, snorted and grunted behind us.

My master straightened a bit. “When the time comes?”

Gorik scoffed and muttered, glaring at the Red. “If you’re here to buy, I’m selling. Other than that, I’ll keep to my own.”

Black Boar marks adorned the beams of the forge roof.

My gift charged out into the thralls and Veikal. Gorik flushed and rubbed his scarred and stubbled mug. *Too fast*. His mind steeled to my assault, but I bullied my way in.

Gorik didn’t care to worship my master. He didn’t admire her, and for a moment, I saw things as he did. Tribal politics disgusted him. All he wanted was to work the forge, earn his keep, and care for his mate and children. That was all. Too many times, his support had gone to unworthy Baikal who’d abandoned him when things had gotten hard. He’d have been a firm supporter for my master, unflagging and loyal to the bone, but he’d no interest in that.

I wanted him to join us.

“I respect that, Gorik,” she said. “If you change your mind, send word to Malgog. He’ll set you up right quick. I’ve a cliff side by a stream that would be a fine spot for you.”

He squinted at her as sparks and embers fluttered past.

“All of your people are welcome,” she added.

He shook his head, eyeing the Red behind her. “If you’re buying, I’m selling. Otherwise, be on your way.”

Other folk had gathered round by now, and the scrutiny was too much.

“Fine,” she said, and I knew that tone. This was her last offer. She turned and walked away. No one ever turned her down, and we stood around until I turned to follow her. Gorik avoided looking at me as if I wasn’t there. He didn’t care about god-words anymore.

We left him then, following our master back to her stead.

Hiltham’s man passed us, walking up beside my master.

“He’s a fool, Aelaku.”

“He has his reasons,” she said.

“That was a long time ago.”

“Not long enough.”

In Rothmin’s time, Reds had helped him force the Black Boar to join the Wolf, but then kept their independence. Now, they resisted the same thing they’d imposed on others.

“Where is your cousin?” she asked, thinking of Hiltham. “I’ve not seen him for weeks.”

“The elders called him back, Aelaku. A moot.”

She grunted.

The Red glanced back at me and then leaned closer to her, confiding, “He sent a word back just for you, Aela.” He whispered into her ear, and she chuckled.

Something about the exchange sat like a rock in my gut. My head ached. The effort to read these folk had winded me. I fell back in the entourage, unable to keep pace with their long strides.

Something in me wanted to control it all, but I had to trust her. She seemed to know more than me. The events of the past few years humbled me. Responsibility for her and her household had made me more careful. That constant attention took more from me than I'd expected.

That night, I drifted into a dreamless sleep, weighed down by so many new feelings and sensations gleaned from Gorik's household.

So, my days went on, managing the mundane affairs of my master's household while deeper things escaped my understanding. What I could do for myself, I did. The mending and cooking were too much for me, but Loga stepped in then, happy now with her mate and a child growing in her. But I washed and brushed our master's hair, braiding the thick tresses with my small fingers, and around them I coiled silver wire as thick as my pinky.

And with each twist of hair, I spoke to the goddess under my breath, reminding her of the promise I'd made on her behalf. Hoping that she would listen, turn back from her travel across the night sky, and favor me.

Just once.

In my master's twenty-third year, days before the winter moot, the gong at the western watchtower sounded. And then another at the southern. Three rapid strikes followed by two more.

I'd never heard that rhythm before.

Vilki came running to the thrall's yard where we sat working, her overlong feet slapping the floor of the dirt alley. I stood up with my heart galloping. My little power raced through them all. It held all the women and men at the chopping block in its grasp, drawing them to me like a mother wolf her cubs.

Vilki clasped her hands at her breast. "Red Bear! Red Bear at the northwest tower! Other Reds to the south!"

I shook my head, trying to understand. Hiltham was a Red Boar. My mind fogged, my limbs distant and tingling.

"They are attacking!" Vilki yelled.

More gongs sounded. Clashing, roars, and bellows. Lightning crackled in the distance at the corners of the village. But I scanned the sky for what would be more threatening to us, up along the cliff side. If they had shamans, it would go badly for us. The Reds had gone around to the far eastern side of the village, the least guarded side, because it abutted steep cliffs and ridges.

Vilki pointed at the southeast guard post. A trickle of black smoke rose from it. Another gong, struck by iron, clanged in the lower village yard.

“I have to go,” she said. “Get yourself hid, Dalis. It’s a war.”

I wanted to ask where our master was, but her eyes told me. In the thick of it, no doubt. Vilki ran back down the alley, grabbing a logging axe along the way.

“Thuka, gather the household,” I said. “To the cellar.”

“The secret one?”

I nodded.

“What about the men? They’ll be out in the forest.”

“Melka will have to watch over them.”

My master’s stead was on the edge of the chief’s, backing up to a dense ironwood forest; beyond it, jagged hills lead to peaks, and beyond them, the great sea. I scanned the treetops, but they were still. We were vulnerable here if any Reds made the difficult trek around to the backside of the village.

I counted eight heads as we rushed to the cellar.

More gongs sounded, and the familiar bellows of Baikal howls filled the air. The Red warriors were close, or it was worse. Treachery within the Zelaugr. I pushed aside the thought that my master was the traitor. Maybe upholding the oracle had finally worn her down? She’d take the rise with the Reds and speak her own god-word.

I tried not to think what that would mean for me.

We clambered down into the rocky ground, through a tall hall to a series of chambers used to store my master’s wealth. These were small alcoves, and the thralls filed into them, cramming in behind crates, sacks, and stacks of furs and pelts.

“Go to the back, Dalis. We’ll do what we can.”

I turned on her. “No, Thuka. You must all stay hidden. You can do nothing to stop them.”

But there was something I could do. If the Red Bear dared enter here, if they even breathed on one of my chicks, I’d incinerate us all. I’d make the choice my mother had not.

The intensity of my feeling startled me, the grimness of it, but I pushed aside all concern. I’d be strong this time.

I remembered my mother’s hand closing into a fist, and the flames dying on her protective shell. She’d pulled them to herself and away from the niche where she’d hidden me... using up her reserves of power.

It is harder to summon a single flame than a torrent.

“No one goes out until we hear our master’s voice,” I announced. I looked each one in the eyes and received a nod. “Cover your ears, your eyes. Stay hidden.”

I’d destroy us all in blue fire if my master died. I didn’t want to serve anyone else. I couldn’t.

“Yes, Dalis,” came the whispered responses. Thuka helped them settle in.

She hid in the first storeroom, and I went to the last with two new female thralls, Ithkans, clasped to my tunic. I held them close and petted their heads, trying to soothe them. Or maybe I did it to soothe myself. I needed to focus and seek my master out, but our breaths were hard, the beating of our hearts wild, and my gift refused. We were underground, but when the giants ran over us, the cellar ceiling shook and crumbled. Beams of ironwood crisscrossed the ceiling, but there were sections of hard mud that cracked under the weight of running Baikal, raining down dry clods and streams of dust.

They’d come fast, and they’d come for my master. They must want to use her as a prize to negotiate.

I grasped my head, rubbing my temples till they ached.

A thrall yelped as shadows danced across the wall of the cellar.

I hushed her, but the light increased. The trap door opened and then shut again.

It was the men coming to join us from the forest. I knew each one: Bordu's shallow breaths, the creak in Falk's joints, the heavy thuds of Asun's gait. More followed behind them in a rush of feeling and sensation—eight of them, at least.

Women whimpered. They were embracing their men. As much as I knew about them, I didn't realize they'd formed attachments, even if they could not be proper families.

Thuka repeated my earlier orders to the men.

A dirty face appeared at the arch of the storeroom where I hid.

"Ethun!" Jonni leapt up from her place at my side and threw herself at him. The same happened with Alli when Lorn appeared, axe in hand.

"Everyone inside," I said. "Quiet."

The five of us huddled close in the alcove. I embraced myself as the thralls grasped each other, like they'd consorted. Married, as they would call it. I sought them all out, but on the edges, not wanting to invade the intimacy of what could be their last moments. I just wanted us safe. I couldn't help but envy them.

Ethun whispered my name.

"What did you see?" I asked.

"Red Bear and others. They didn't see us, I think, but it's mayhem. Doesn't matter who's who." His eyes were wide. He was an expert hunter of small game. He knew what it meant to kill, but he did the chore well, not letting the animal suffer too much. From his face, I could tell that was not happening above.

Dust drifted down on us from the ceiling, the timbers shaking. The pairs grasped each other harder, stifling whimpers. My power spilled out into the chambers, soothing them all.

Peace, I thought. *Peace*.

It was a curse to want one's captors to be victorious, but it was a curse I welcomed. I'd see us through this war. It couldn't last long. Baikal would fight unto the last, their rage driving them. They'd annihilate each other.

I readied myself, surfacing my mother's last moments and the way her body had felt when she'd summoned the blue fire. I'd used the technique before to control the shadows, mimicking her body in my own, but in reverse... to *still* the shadows. It seemed blasphemous to contradict the goddess, but she'd put me in an impossible situation.

And now I hoped she wouldn't hold it against me as I searched through the echo of my mother's sensations. Just as they threatened to overwhelm me, someone shuffled down the hall.

"Dalis?" someone whispered. I lifted my head. The room wobbled. "Dalis?" whispered Thuka.

"Give me a moment," I croaked. How long I'd been away, I couldn't tell. The light was no longer bright.

"How long have we been here?" I asked.

"It's evening," Lorn said. "The sun is setting."

The ground above us was still.

"You were sleeping, Dalis," Alli said, her tiny voice sounding louder than usual.

"Dalis!" Thuka hissed.

The trapdoor opened. We froze.

"Come out, all of you. Slowly." It was Dormu.

My power flooded her. She scratched at her back and neck as if attacked by biting flies. That was how it felt to her. I didn't care. I had to know.

"Priestess!" she called out. "Tell your goddess to stop!"

I eased my probing. She'd been loyal to my master and fought for her. She cradled a crushed left hand. A knee swelled red and throbbed.

"Everyone out," I said. "Everyone out. Slowly."

I inched up to standing.

"Go on," I said to the thralls in my alcove. They grasped each other still. "Don't let Dormu see you like that."

Their hands fell away to their sides, and they gave each other parting glances.

We walked down the cellar hall to the steps leading upward. I covered my eyes. It seemed too bright. I'd been deep in my own feelings for too long.

As I inspected the thralls, a pang of guilt struck me... I'd been ready to burn them all rather than let them suffer a different master, rather than give fate a chance to play out. Without my master, it had seemed hopeless. How had that thought come to dominate me so?

Vilki appeared then, as bloodied as Dormu; someone had smashed in the left side of her face. She couldn't breathe well.

"*Log's deaf.*" The words came out garbled. "*Eh math 'ed boh.*"

Loga was dead. And her unborn child with her. Her man had been a Red Boar. It must have been all the Reds who'd attacked and not just the Bears. She'd either sided with him, or fought him. Either way, Loga was dead, and I was sorry for it.

"Where is our master?" I asked.

"She asked for you," Dormu said. "She's in the bath hut. Enter slowly."

I grabbed the thralls I knew could best manage the work and we set out, running to the bath.

Smoke flowed through the village from burning huts. We coughed, and tears streamed from my eyes. Ahead, a wall of Baikal stood with their weapons and armor bristling in the orange light. We turned into a smaller alley that the larger Baikal could not enter. Making our way through thrall alleys, we avoided anything that looked like trouble until we made it to the bath.

Timoth, Fain, and Womtha stood outside, guarding the door. I avoided looking them in the eye. Blood and grime covered them.

“My master called for me,” I said to them.

They grunted and stepped aside.

At the door, I stopped to gather myself, wiping the burning tears from my face and clearing my throat.

Goddess above, strengthen me.

My master stood in front of the bathing pool facing the waters, her back to the door.

There was the sound of bubbling, dripping. Water lapping against the rock. The air was damp and warm.

If she was in pain, she gave no sign. But bloody water streamed down her form to the rocky floor of the bath hut.

I held back the thralls with my arms spread out wide.

In her left hand, my master grasped a string of six blue light globes caked with blood and grime. Their light had gone out, but her globes still shone, lighting the inside of the hut in pale blue.

Her skin looked pitch black.

Blood covered her, dripping upon the rock. It had seeped into everything. It drenched her harness and her silk tunic. Someone had torn off one of her braids. An angry patch of bright red skin was all that remained. Welts, scratches, bruises, and deep cuts marred her body.

Her harness of globes, ripped from her shoulder, dangled from her hips. Her belt threatened to fall from the weight of the daggers she'd collected during the battle.

She snorted and snuffled like a bear, clearing the rage still rising in her even though the battle ended an hour ago. She had enough rage in her for more. I wended my way through the fringe of her feelings and dared skim the surface of her thoughts. They'd brought the fight to her own stead. She'd trusted the Reds, and they'd betrayed her.

When her breath was more even and her heart slowed, I ordered the braziers lit.

My master's left hand trembled. It wasn't the rage. Bloody bits of flesh, caked blood, and hair filled the gaps between the finger-length spikes of her leather cuff. She held out her hand for us to remove the cuff. The women struggled with the binds, but also with the blood and the gore.

I breathed deep, sensing the rising frustration on all sides. The thralls fumbled with the blood-soaked ties.

"Let me," I said to them. I drew out my small blade used for cutting herbs and cut the ties, freeing her. The cuff I tossed on the growing pile of kit. I wiped the blade and slipped it back into the sheath. I dipped my hands into a half-filled bucket, washing away the blood. She glanced at me, her eyes watery and distant. I searched her feelings, driven to know what had wounded her.

One thought came to me: Hiltham.

My master had slain him.

Hiltham had been a good pledge, but in the end, blood ties ran deep.

Trosgan had been uncompromising, demanding too much of the Reds, and now she'd lost a pledge. A lover. Killed by her own hand. His blood must have covered her, and she wanted to be free of it.

She let out a deep exhale and rattled the globes dangling from her hand. They clinked like shaman charms in the wind.

I approached and opened my hands, inviting her to drop them.

“Get this off me,” she said.

I set the globes in my bucket of sudsy water and pressed my hands to an exposed vein of *kith* at the top of the pool. From the source of the spring, a train of bubbles rose to the surface. I checked the water’s temperature with my fingers. She liked it near scalding. Such heat was not something I ever needed for myself, but Thuka had asked me if I could warm the water, and I did.

“The earth god loves your goddess,” Thuka had said to me.

I inspected the hem of my master’s tunic. Blood stained my fingertips. “The silk will have to be burned, master.”

She shook her head. “Wash it.”

It was Mari’s silk. She hadn’t forgotten her thrall. She’d wear it dyed in blood.

“Yes, master.”

“I can do it,” piped up one of the Yatani thralls.

I shot her a silencing glance. My master didn’t seem to notice her.

I motioned the women forward to help remove the layers. By this time, I reached my master’s hips, me at over six feet tall and her at thirteen. The thralls I assigned to serve her were Yatani, much smaller at around five feet tall.

I picked them because they’d gotten over their giant-fear quickly and worked hard. Their small but strong fingers worked swiftly to remove our master’s armor and garments. Baikal armor wasn’t for defense as much as to intimidate. With it all on, she looked like a god coming down from the mountains—massive horns protruding from her shoulders, claws and fangs sewn into straps about her powerful arms and thighs, and strips of wolf fur streaming from her shoulders and down her back.

The thralls hadn't seen her like this before. I hadn't, either. Hunts and raids were never so bloody, but this had been different. She'd fought her pledges.

I went back to the bucket and started washing the globes. They'd been her reward. In one battle, she'd more than doubled her count. She'd earned the largest share of them because she'd killed the most.

The layers came off into a heap and the thralls took them away to have them cleaned by the men elsewhere. The harness, her plates of horn and bone, were too heavy for the women.

Nathuri, a thrall from the Dragon Lands and one of my master's new favorites—perhaps because she reminded her of Mari—poured scented oils into the pool.

The spring was hot, and my master turned pink as she climbed into it.

She dunked her hair under the water, cramming herself deep down into the rocky depths. After an hour of soaking, she lifted herself out and sat on a slab for the women to scrub her, tease out the knots in her hair, remove the silver rings from her braids. I focused on scouring the globes, caked in blood and grime, but all the while monitored the thralls. One was becoming nervous, her fingers trembling with the clotted blood stuck to the rings of silver binding my master's hair.

"Walla, go fetch the lilac soap," I instructed her.

Walla nodded, clasping her hands to her chest in thanks.

I hadn't noticed how powerful my master appeared, especially next to these Yatani, who were like little stick women next to my master's mass. I recalled the giant who'd killed my mother and his rippling muscle, thick and savage. That was how she looked now.

She was a true Baikal.

I laid the globes out on a strip of cloth to dry. The ones she wore were still bright. She was a mighty vessel. She'd earned ten already—more than any elder of her generation. Hers still glowed brightly, and she could harness more than any man. It was the same with Mornae women. Theirs was the harnessing of power. They had the greatest capacity for it.

The other thralls washed her with soap. Streams of pink lather ran along the floor, as she was still bleeding. They washed it all away with buckets of water, but still somewhere on her body, there must have been deeper cuts.

Nathuri handed me ointment in a clay jar. I inspected my master for the deepest cuts—this was the only time I gave her orders—cleansing and dabbing ointment into them, searching her with my power for deeper wounds and breaks that had no outward sign.

I sighed, pressing my fingers to her left side. She had the dangerous habit of leaving her weak side exposed.

“Two ribs. A toe. The cuts will heal by morning. Aelath should protect your left.” Aelath gave her advantages, but she used that power for offense. Defense was not something she preferred.

She grunted. “Willow bark.”

I handed her a packet of the dust wrapped in pine-pulp; she swallowed it whole. I'd made the packets myself, adding ingredients my mother had used when our villagers had suffered from ailments. Thuka had offered others she'd discovered in the forest. I tasted them first. Mornae were naturally resistant to poisons and could sense them in their bodies. My master took the dose of four grown men. She abhorred weakness of any kind. She'd break a second toe to keep the one that ailed her from making her hobble, so I did what I could to blunt the pain.

Once the rings were out and her hair washed, I sent the thralls away and worked out the remaining tangles myself.

“There’s a moot tonight,” she said.

“The globes are clean, master.”

“Many tribes will be there. I don’t think they all mean to serve.”

“I’ll send word to your pledges.”

“Daggers only.”

“Yes, master.”

“Bring the priestess.”

I nodded and battled with a knot of hair.

She grunted. She seemed troubled.

I worked lavender oil into her shoulders, neck, and back like I was imbuing thread. I drove the heat into her hard muscle—a Baikal was like iron—spending the power within me. Her skin grew hot and red in response.

She grumbled, but I kept at it. She’d bear any pain to stand tall in the moot.

It was arduous work, and my hands cramped from the effort. I didn’t know whether it worked, or what it would do if it did. Mornae were not skilled healers except to other Mornae.

“You brought back bones, master?” I asked. It was one of their customs to add the bones of enemies—thralls didn’t count—to wear on their person.

“Hands. Have them boiled and cleaned. Keep a single bone from each finger. The rest can go to the sacred place of the Reds.”

They were an enemy, but she’d not offend the gods. There was victory, and then there was gloating. The gods always destroyed gloaters.

A gruesome thought, but they also wore the bones of the beasts they slew—they were trophies. Fighting their own was the single

greatest challenge, save fighting a Mornae.

“Yes, master. I’ll do it right away.” The bones were important. Proof of her prowess.

The thralls appeared again with a clean set of her garb.

“Fetch her hunting belt,” I whispered. “And the cloak. The black wolf one.”

I knelt behind her, waiting for her to be ready to dress. She remained still for a time, hunched over. She seemed broken.

When the thralls returned with her cloak, I stepped outside and told Fain what she’d ordered. “Perhaps you should all bathe and prepare.”

“We’ll take turns,” Fain said. “Womtha, you first—you look like a bloody teat.” Poor Womtha looked the worse because his pale white skin shone even more brightly against the red.

“Daggers only?” Timoth confirmed.

“Yes, that’s what she wants,” I said.

He shook his head.

“But she gave no order on what your Veikal may carry,” I added.

He grinned—like a snarl. Timoth’s rage still simmered. They all felt betrayed.

I returned to my master.

“Master, your warriors have your command. Shall Tonn bear your hammer?”

She nodded. “Malgog, my battle axe.”

She sat down on a dry, stone bench as the warm vapors of lavender and the sweet scent of lilac wafted up to the ceiling.

The thralls and I remained waiting on her until the guards had bathed, and then I went to prepare myself.

Even with the deaths, there was no room in the chief's yard. Daggers were the best weapon in this case. My master's men made a path for her—pushing others aside. She took her place on Trosgan's right. To her right stood the shamans. Rigir had a black eye and a deep gash across his chest filled with a green poultice to help it heal faster.

Kill the shaman first—that was what every Baikal child learned about war. But old Rigir was a tested warrior. He spat a wad of pink into a nearby fire, the only bit of free space in all the yard.

Other shamans hadn't been so lucky. Their numbers had dwindled.

I hadn't seen Yorl since last summer, when the chief had sent him to quell dissent in Black Tusk lands. He'd reached fourteen feet tall. A train of Veikal women, all tall, followed him like a tail. I could see why. He'd pleasant features for a Baikal, and he held the promise of the rise. He was a fine specimen. Three globes draped across his chest, interspaced with black wolf teeth. A thick hide belt held a string of smaller globes. He'd grown a long black beard braided into three forks. Silver bands, my handiwork, adorned them. He didn't balk at wearing what I had made.

Chief Trosgan sat the rise, his hammer resting head down against the stone bench. His pledges, though I knew their minds to be turning against him, lined the front of the porch.

“Splendid victory,” he rumbled. “Rothmin’s seed endures. Blasted Reds.”

“We are loyal,” called a Red at the front of the crowd of elders.

Trosgan could take their heads right now. That would end the conflict. My heart sank, as I didn’t want to see my master killing. She excelled at it, but I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want those feelings in me, not again. Not from her.

Trosgan muttered, “But for how long, Valkin? How long will the Red Tusk sit at my fire, eat my meat, and find mates among my Veikal? How can I trust any Red again?”

Valkin squinted hard, his lip twitching so that his beard flicked up and down. He motioned to men at the yard entrance. There was a scuffle.

“Let them in!” Trosgan bellowed.

A pair of Red Tusk dragged in a Baikal and two Veikal.

My master signaled to Malgog with a glance, and he came closer, bearing her axe with two hands. She motioned for me to step back. There was almost no room, but I pressed myself between Fain and Womtha.

“This is my brother’s son, Zothin,” Valkin said. “I have raised him since the Whites took his father.”

Murmurs. The Whites were a legendary tribe of Baikal who’d once contended with the Mornae over the crater. Once cast out, they’d become twisted—wraiths haunting the furthest northern reaches of Vailassa.

“He conspired with the Bears,” Valkin said.

Yorl grabbed his hammer, ready to squash the man’s head.

“Wait, wait!” Trosgan barked. He stared at Zothin. “Tell me who else.”

Zothin’s one good eye lolled back and forth. Cuts crisscrossed his scalp where they’d shorn him with a knife. A massive bruise covered the left side of his face, his eye swollen and red. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Goddess, above!

Valkin squinted. “Chief, we took his tongue and offered it to Barka as a peace offering.”

Trosgan’s fists tightened. Various elders in the crowd seemed pleased by this—the Red Tusk had taken care of the problem—but the chief didn’t see it that way.

I searched Zothin, fighting past his pain. I’d become more proficient, and barreled through to the base of his skull, searching there for accumulated sensations that would lead me to his memories. A loud breath escaped my lips. He was not a traitor. Rather, it was the accuser.

“You should have let me question him, Valkin. Am I not your chief?” Trosgan blustered, slamming the rise-stone with his open hand.

The Red Tusk grimaced. “We take care of our own, Chief.” He’d spat the word *chief* out.

My gift plundered all these new men’s sensations, as well as the women of Yorl’s entourage. The more I searched, the more I realized Zothin was innocent, and my master’s supporter. There was more treachery amongst the Reds. This was no peace offering, but a sacrifice for power. A man’s power was in his tongue, and in this case, the power to speak the truth, for the man had no writing.

Somehow, I needed to tell my master before the chief made his judgement. I tensed and felt lightheaded. I looked at Malgog. He was

watching our master's every twitch in case she needed her weapon.

"Of course... Chief," Valkin assented. "Yes, we will know to do so in the future."

I counted three others united in the conspiracy. They could not help getting hot and anxious, their skin tingling. The cramped yard, Baikal standing shoulder to shoulder, left no room to swing a fist.

"The wind speaks to me," my master said, rising.

Guilty eyes widened, and they glanced at each other.

"What does Aelath say?" Rigir asked.

"That there are here... in front of us, some who've pledged and have disloyal hearts."

I swallowed hard. She stepped in front of me, blocking my view. Malgog stepped to her side, her axe ready. I peered through the gap between them.

The globes strung about her—now twenty-three, a considerable number for her age—glowed.

"What are you saying, sister?" Yorl scanned the crowd. He hoped to see or hear what his sister found.

I wanted to whisper to her, to tell her the names.

Instead, she stood there still, forcing them with her presence to confess.

It didn't take long for Yorl and the chief to pick out the guilty. Their gazes moved between them all, but they didn't act. Yorl was more self-controlled than I'd expected.

"I can speak to the man," Gothar, a shaman of the forest, said. The shaman of Melka had a gift akin to mine, wherein they could speak to those with no voice.

A knife glinted in Valkin's hand, and he sliced Zothin's throat open, showing the mouth to be an empty, gaping, black space. Zothin's eyes squeezed shut.

Rage swelled at the sight of a bloody weapon. I stepped back, focused on preserving myself. If the shadows rose in me, they must not see me, or I'd cause the rage to increase.

"He was guilty!" Valkin yelled, holding up the knife and wiping it across his hide tunic. "Barka declares it so! Those of the gray stones have said it."

Tonn was there at my side, and he grunted, urging me to stand straight. I inched closer. Again, my gift sprawled out into the assembly.

Rigir pursed his thin lips, disgusted by the mention of his rivals, but he couldn't speak it. Nor did he contradict the man's word. Still, he raised himself up as tall as he could, globes glowing.

"What say you, Rigir? Is there treachery here?" Trosgan had screamed the words, rattling my bones.

The crowd shook their heads, avoiding looking anyone in the eye, wondering who the traitors were. There was an evil amongst them. Rage swelled, moving through them like waves.

"So, no one will answer my daughter's word? She who speaks for Aelath?"

My breath caught in my throat with so many truths lodged inside. What could I say? I couldn't reveal my power. I'd only prove them right that I was a daemon, a hidden enemy—a spy, even, controlling events.

"Maybe she's wrong, Father." Yorl said. "Maybe there is evil on the wind."

He meant me. I'd be nothing but an evil to him because my god-word could only serve my master. But he'd find a way. I knew that. He'd use me in the end.

"Maybe," Trosgan said with a snarl. The chief motioned my master to stand down, but she didn't move. Her gaze must have

been terrible to behold because all those in front of her cowered.

Again, Trosgan waved her off. He still had a move to make, and all of this, including the fact that there were still traitors, he knew already. I hadn't even bothered to read him. He'd always seemed so transparent.

"There is another way to fight an evil wind, my son. Make way for my new pledges, my new allies."

Everyone crammed tighter to the sides, making a path to the chief.

The Baikal who entered the yard were the size of Veikal, but they didn't have the deformity so common in northern Veikal. They were much shorter than the Baikal I'd known.

"Brothers of the Yellow Boar!" the chief bellowed. "And the Yellow Tusk!"

The crowd grumbled, confused. The traitors, especially.

The elders of these tribes held up their hands in peace.

"These tribes have pledged to the Zelaugr," Trosgan said, his eyes narrowed. "To Yorl."

A silence fell over the assembly. In one move, he'd gained the advantage.

My master remained still. Baikal love strength, but also a powerful leader with many supporters. They abhorred being on the outside, left out of the herd. Hendar gave me away so the chief would let him rejoin the community. My master's supporters were dreading being on the outside with her.

Already, within ten breaths, those who'd pledged to my master were considering pledging to Yorl.

The strong get stronger.

"These tribes... many hundreds... seek refuge, Zelaugr's protection," Trosgan said. "We will grant it in exchange for their

eternal pledge.”

They nodded. “You have it, Chief Trosgan,” said one of them, yellow-ochre symbols caked on his face. “And you, Yorl.”

Rigir snorted. They’d not mentioned the omen.

“*Rokag*,” the crowd hissed. It meant *unfavored*, but it sounded more insulting. *Forsaken by the gods* was the better meaning.

Rigir raised his staff, rattling the charms dangling from it. The crowd hushed.

“We are not of these people, great chief,” Rigir said. “They are *dreka*. Everyone north of the Green Sea knows this. We are Sons of the Sea. We bear the weight of Barka’s power. We should have nothing to do with them.”

The Yellow Tusk elder protested, “We, too, are Sons of the Sea. We once sat upon the peaks of the north! We’ve not been unfaithful.”

Just unwilling, my mother would have said.

Trosgan’s thick eyelids lowered as he drummed his fingers on the stone bench. “Are we not like them, Rigir? You know the truth of things. Should I cast them out to certain doom? When we need them here? When we can make ready now!”

Rigir squinted at him. “What doom is it, Great Chief?”

Trosgan leaned forward, scanning the crowd, meeting his people with a steely gaze. “The ancient doom. Armies of gold, bearing the sun in each hand. The usurpers, Rigir. You know the tales. Golden mountains breathing fire all over our lands, stealing our heritage from us. You want to spit on these folk? We are next, I tell you. Our ancient enemy has been silent, but they return.”

Rigir was unsure. There was a cryptic message in all that, but it served its purpose in rallying all those gathered. And the ancient enemy the chief spoke of was also the enemy of my people...

though we'd once come from them. Rigir swallowed his words, but glared at the chief.

"Our long-separated brothers will live at the base of the hills," Trosgan said. "On the edge of the forest." That would satisfy the shamans. "They will live in the Flats."

The Flats weren't Trosgan's to give, but no one said anything. If these newcomers weren't on Zelaugr land, they didn't care. I had to admire the chief for his strategy. He knew his people well, and used their weakness against them.

And Yorl stood there smugly, in on the chief's plan.

My master remained still, as if she also was aware, but she'd stepped out, taking a risk by claiming there were traitors—but of course there were traitors!

I had to pay more attention to the chief and Yorl from now on.

My head pounded, and my body trembled. I reined in my power. It was all too much, like a too full basket. Countless new people flooded my gift with stories and feelings about things I'd never known before. I could do no more.

In one move, Trosgan had made a wall around the Zelaugr. A risky move, but he didn't feel any threat from these *rokag*. Yorl towered over them as my master towered over me.

The Yellow Tusk elder had wooden boxes brought in—chests of elaborate make, not crafted by Baikal or Veikal. He had them set before the chief and opened for all to see. Sparkling gems, silver, yellow metal—this last called gold, Sayin's metal, useless to Baikal—and crafted things plundered from the south, like Mari and Thuka.

Rigir elbowed a junior shaman forward to look. The shaman stepped closer and reached into the box, holding up a blue gem. "Barka's breath," he whispered to Rigir. "It holds no power." He tossed it back into the box and shuffled away.

A hush fell over the crowd.

Trosgan chuckled, but his gaze pierced the junior. Rigir glared back at him.

“This *is* power,” Trosgan said. “A new power.” One he could control. It seemed the crowd would do whatever he ordered for such a gem.

The Yellow Tooth elder cleared his throat, drawing attention to the rods of steel in the second box. “This is what the Yellow tribes south of the Moon Sea can give you, Chief. If only we can live under your protection. We come with a hundred warriors.”

He paused as the giants around him scoffed. The elder knew his men didn’t measure up, but was undeterred because the Baikal nearest him lusted for the steel. And he’d more to offer. From inside his tunic he took out a cord with hundreds of tokens.

“And thralls. More than enough to tend and farm and craft for you while you and your son conquer all the lands.”

Trosgan heaved himself up, hammer in hand.

I watched it all play out, mouth open. Trosgan had them beat. He’d push aside their rebellion. The remaining Reds numbered twenty elders in all, and most too old to count. Their treachery would die out in time.

“So, it is! Let all here know that the Zelaugr will unite all the tribes. All those who refuse are *dreka*. Fools! Enemies abound. We have the omen of the gods in our favor. We will conquer!”

At that, he motioned to his servants, and his Veikal brought out a massive hammer—not of iron, but forged in dull gray steel with an ironwood haft dark as its bark. They offered it to Yorl.

“This is the steel from the south,” Trosgan said. “It can smash anything.”

Not anything. They had only painted it over to appear like *boka*, but it looked magnificent compared to their iron weapons. Appearance was half the battle.

The Baikal murmured and then barked their approval like a pack of wolves. The barks turned to cheers and the stomping of feet, so that the ground trembled. One by one, they raised their right hands. Even my master's folk. They all wanted what Trosgan offered.

"And to seal this pact, the Zelaugr grant the Flats to any who offer allegiance! Baikal or Veikal of any tribe or clan!"

The shaman contingent shifted, but he'd already negotiated with them. He didn't seek the approval of my goddess.

My master shook her head, hands on her hips, until Trosgan said something to her which I could not hear over the din of cheers. She raised her hand to her shoulder, and even more cheers broke out. Yorl raised his hand. I thought him handsome, lordlier than he'd ever been, with his massive fist pounding the air above his head, his gaze fixed on one traitor.

By the next dawning of the goddess, the three traitors and others were dead, found in alleys between huts or drowned in their bath. In the commotion, no one noticed, or no one said.

My master said nothing to me until two weeks later, when I was arranging her hunting gear.

"Your goddess."

I turned to her. "Yes, master."

"She must serve me."

I wasn't certain what she meant, but her father seemed to always be ahead of her, and while he'd made her rich with treasures for my

services, he was always winning the game they played.

“Yes, master... the goddess is fickle.”

She rose then, so fast that I stumbled back. She stood over me, and I became faint from head to toe, a dry leaf in the wind. Her fists tightened. Shadows billowed beneath me, grasping at me and reaching upward.

“She will serve me.”

I bent down, pressing my face to the ground. I could almost hear my mother's scathing commentary.

She backed away, and I crawled out through the flaps of her chamber.

Only Dormu sat at the hearth, stoking the fire, looking forlorn. Loga was dead, and Vilki was on the verge, choking down sickly blood gushing from inside her head. She'd be dead in a week. Nothing we did helped her, and a fever had taken hold.

“I'm sorry,” I mumbled.

She snorted.

I sat down. I wanted to be in the thrall hut, but Dormu was alone. Nothing good came of my attention, though. The Veikal rage just festered in Dormu, compounded now by having only me at the hearth fire. When she rose and left, I exhaled, glad it was over. I hugged myself, alone by the hearth.

The stink of the unwashed, manure, and rivulets of waste assailed me. A train of thralls sat in the muck, rotting away in the upturned earth with no covering to protect them from the incessant wind and rain of the Flats. They didn't look up as I passed, so they seemed to me a writhing brown mass of arms and legs. They waited to die, and from the stench, some among them had already met that fate. The living were already ghosts.

They were not the first pile of humanity I'd seen. The *rokag* treated their thralls worse than their shaggy cattle. They at least could roam the plains, pissing and defecating away from each other.

Handlers came out of a lean-to, clubs in hand. They grunted and pawed the ground, the yellow-stained fangs and teeth tied around their legs chattering. The hairs on my neck stood on end as I moved past them, their makeshift weapons tight in their fists. I fiddled with my master's pouch so the brand upon it was visible, and smoothed out the long scarf over my head that bore her mark woven into the undyed cloth. For once, I was glad to be of her tribe.

They snorted in response.

I could never buy a thrall from them anyway. And I'd not risk bringing such ill-omen as an already dead thrall—for I knew from my

gift that they were dead inside. Their bodies would soon catch up.

The handlers stalked me until I crossed over a refuse-choked gully separating their territory from the open plain. My status as *dalis* had always protected me, but at that moment, I wished I hadn't left Tonn and Malgog at the central market. I'd ditched them, slipping away through the crowd. I was there for information and trinkets and the occasional decent thrall. Tonn and Malgog, both battle-hardened Veikal, intimidated these newcomers.

I stopped. Shapes loomed to the north. They were hammering spikes into the ground for their tents. Another one of them, his face painted with blue—though the woad was now almost black with filth—was making a hole for their standard. He looked up and roared, but not at me. To the west, breaking through the early morning fog, a rival band was arriving.

I hurried along, searching for a safe crossing. Weapons clashed behind me. I dared look over my shoulder. A third group had crossed the gully and joined the fray.

The bloody fringe is what they called the edge of the camps. It was dangerous to be there, but being in the mass of bodies was more dangerous for me. Nothing could stop their feelings from swamping me. My gift rampaged through them like raiding Baikal, through hundreds at a time. Greedy to know, it brought them all to me like a swelling tide. Even on the camp's edge, I struggled to keep myself upright. My life had always been a movement from one calculated risk to another, from one danger to another.

As dawn arrived, the true ugliness of the Flats emerged. A thick, black haze sat over it from the constant fires. The wind thankfully blew it away from Rothmin's stead, but it often lingered here or mixed with rain and muck, a mass of gray and brown. I found a

section with large stones set like a bridge through a deep trench with a stream cutting through the sludge.

I leapt across the stones and made for the thrall market. I covered my face, breathing through my mouth to avoid the worst of the smell. I kept to the market's edge. As soon as my eyes fell on a mass of thralls, their feelings surged into me. I walked faster, cutting through piles of them huddled together for warmth. The whites of their eyes stood out from the tangle of arms and legs.

I emerged from an alley between two longhouses. A spray of blood shot out from a thrall's mouth, splattering onto me. I didn't flinch, and continued past the mayhem. Behind me, thralls moaned under the blows of a lash or fist. I couldn't understand these newcomers or their minions. I kept myself reined in, but the effort drained me. I despised this so-called gift. If only I could control it, to better serve my master.

I turned the corner into a dry alley between two longhouses and wiped myself with a rag. Bloody saliva stained my tunic, but that could wait. I hastened to find Tonn and Malgog.

The cries of anguish were insufferable. Those not ill pressed their heads to the small windows for fresh air. Despite my curiosity, I tried not to take them in, not to record them in my heart and mind... but I couldn't help myself. I learned their words and did my best to soothe them before I reached the end of the house.

It was a momentary balm. Most of these thralls would die come winter. The earth god stole every inch of warmth he could from them as an offering to his beloved Vai. The Baikal told a similar story, and there was truth in it.

The Red's attack and Yellow's arrival had left me shaken, concerned for our future and our safety. I walked through the squalor of the Flats with shadows thrumming at my feet, wanting to rise. I'd

sleep like a stone that night, drained of my power. Three days remained until *vaizora*, when I could rest in the goddess-light. How I relished that time when she could replenish me and remind me I was Mornae. Seeing these people in their squalor, nothing but skin and bones, I resented bearing my master's burden.

That's when I found Chana and Noreh, young and helpless. The women, southerners like Thuka and Mari, clasped each other's hands, eyes glazed, shivering not because of cold, but because of the scene. Their *rokag* handlers were whipping a man who was already dead.

I should have walked on, hardening my heart, but I stepped closer, my gray hand grasping the shawl covering my head. The other *rokag* backed away from me.

I directed myself to one of those beating the corpse. "Who owns these women?"

My appearance must have startled the one beating the dead man. Shadows thrummed at my feet. He stepped back and tripped over the body. None laughed. I let the shawl fall to my shoulders and a rush of fear ran through them, rising into a loud murmur.

Chin raised like I was the most powerful matron to walk the land, I gazed at him through narrowed eyes. "Well?"

Those around us whispered about me, my master's name on their lips. The *rokag* handler was growing angry for looking so foolish. His fists relaxed as he heard my master's name said more loudly.

"I can trade them," he said. "One is lame. The other is an idiot."

I didn't flinch. I knew more about the two women than anyone there. My power had sought them out already, racing away from my control. Chana was lame, but only because of his ineptitude. She

was also strong and hardened. She must have grown up near blackrock because the goddess had found a home in her.

They'd terrified the other woman, Noreh, into muteness. Care and time could heal her. I could help her. If I left them here, the lame one might lash out one day. Then, these brutes would whip the two of them to corpses. It was not my practice to rescue thralls in this way, but these two moved me, waking a feeling in me I'd lost since Mari's death.

They had her appearance, with their hair parted down the middle, gathered in coiled braids at the nape of their necks; large, deep blue eyes set in bronze, heart-shaped faces.

I removed a small ring of silver from my belt and offered it to the handler. "My master desires these. You will sell them to her."

His eyes widened. "What does she want with them?"

I felt a prickling at the back of my neck as other *rokag* stood behind me, clubs thudding against open palms.

Shadows flickered up my legs in response, and the southerners stepped back.

I pressed the silver toward the handler.

Tonn and Malgog arrived armed not with clubs, but with iron spears. They made space around me.

Malgog stood ahead of me, peering at the handler. "Is this man giving you trouble, Dalis?"

I looked to the handler, as important as I could make myself. "This man is selling these two women to our master."

"What is taking so long?" Tonn asked. They both grimaced at the squalor and held their spears ready.

The handler snatched the silver ring from my hand and held out the women's tokens. I took them—ratty bits of cloth on cords—and I confirmed the marks on the tokens around their necks. The women

trembled as I touched them. I motioned to them, trying to calm their hearts with what little energy I had left.

They nodded and huddled beside me.

I turned then and walked away before tempers roused further. In my mind, I continued to harbor the simplest reality: they might grieve over harming a daughter of Vai, cut to pieces for it, but I'd still be dead.

"House above all," I whispered, my eyes turned up to the sky.

Behind me, Tonn barked an order at the southerners. "Clean this up! What are you, savages?"

I looked ahead, straight to my master's stead, up on the ridge, hidden by ironwoods, ravines, and other defenses. It was like fleeing an enemy's land to sanctuary. I wouldn't scurry, though. I wouldn't let them see the slightest fear in me.

Fear led to rage and rage to death.

It was no victory to buy Chana and Noreh. They were still captives, but at least my master would treat them well—so long as I could teach them how to survive.

I'd never let my feelings impede my work, but I couldn't let these two continue in that condition. Perhaps I was softening, or I'd always been soft. But I had the power to change the circumstances of a handful of thralls, so I did.

We walked through two steep mounds on the path to Rothmin's Stead. Atop one hill, a rail-thin shaman stared at me. He was next in line to Rigir, and one of the tallest Baikal I'd seen yet, though hunched over by age. He made a sign with long fingers. Charms tied to a nearby tree tinkled in the breeze.

When I looked back, he'd gone.

A tenuous, unspoken alliance had developed between me and these shamans. They were under threat, too. We had more in

common than anyone else there. We were true Vailassans, sons and daughters of the gods, and despite our power, I felt we were losing. We'd not gain power through crushing and destroying. Our future lay in convincing, in preserving the fading past.

A lost cause, it seemed.

I left Chana and Noreh outside my master's door and entered by myself. She sat on the ground by the hearth because she was too large for the logs we used. I offered her a Mornae greeting, hands pressed to my collar.

Her eyes narrowed, studying me. She turned back to sharpening her hunting knife. I dreaded that both Tonn and Malgog would go with her.

"Malgog will stay while I'm away," she said. "Stay near my hearth. Fain will be here."

My gut eased.

She held out her hand. I approached and emptied my pockets, dropping my acquisitions in her palm. Of interest was a gold brooch with blood-red gems and a polished bone with healing powers. She frowned at the latter one and shook her head. I removed it from the pile. The third was a long iron writing pen. It had symbols running around it, but I didn't know them. She liked to collect such things, studying them and then setting her own smiths to work the designs.

"The brooch is from a land far to the south where men make boats to go on great waters."

"Not the sea."

“No, not the sea, master. Small waters.”

“And the other?”

“The pen is from a place I do not know. The owner parted with it for a trifle. He could tell me nothing of its origin.”

She closed her hand on them and fixed her eyes on me.

“I’ve bought two new thralls... southerners.”

She groaned. “If they die this winter, I’ll sell you to Borthag.”

I laughed, but she didn’t. She could never sell me. Fate bound us by god-word. I felt my cheeks flush hot. “They are strong, Master. The goddess favors them.”

She pursed her lips, pondering how it was so.

“The blackrock runs deep into the far south,” I said. “Though only in some places. There are even black peaks where the earth god rises high above the ground.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What did you learn from the *rokag*?”

“The usual, master. Talk about an invasion far to the south.”

Whatever the invasion was, it had upset the careful balance of power in Vailassa. This was a harsh land where its peoples lived according to their gods. Tribes pressed north while the north diminished in its ancient power.

She reached forward, and I resisted moving away. I had long practice at not startling at her movements. Her finger brushed the blood on my tunic.

“It’s not your blood, master. I was passing through the Flats.”

I didn’t need to explain. True northerners despised the camps of the Flats. Not the brutality so much as the filth. She grimaced, and her rage kindled.

“Fine.”

And that was it.

She didn't ask to see the new thralls for herself, or question me further. It was enough that I'd chosen them.

I bowed my head and left her.

Outside, I thanked Tonn and Malgog. They just grunted. They were doing their duty to my master, and not for me—though I knew how protective they were of me.

There was something grotesque about the Veikal, the purest of them. They seemed not to fit their own skins. Their oversized bones sometimes looked borrowed from a Baikal—enormous hands or feet, or a massive jaw or forehead—out of proportion. Not human and not giant. Veikal were the glue between them, but to look at them, at their most defined, was to behold something of a monster.

They were never quite their own thing.

Tonn and Malgog were hunters raised in the chief's household before the chief had assigned them to my master. They seemed not to care that they served a woman. She could skewer a deer at a hundred paces. That seemed enough for them. They could track game like hounds. They'd proven themselves to her and made oblations to the gods—except mine, of course.

Tonn was taller by an inch, with a slack jaw and two missing front teeth from where a Baikal had smashed in his face as a boy. His jaw had never healed properly, and he slobbered and spat every word. On hunts, he'd bind up his jaw so as not to make any noise. He had immense shoulders and a broad chest atop a narrow waist and lanky legs.

Malgog was the elder of the two and had a face like a totem: a wide, square head with hard-edged features. His disproportions were less pronounced, but he had large, powerful hands. I'd seen him crush rocks with smaller Baikal. It was a contest and pastime he

enjoyed. He'd sell the dust to wandering nomads who thought it had magical powers. Malgog said little, but he was reliable.

They were uncomplicated. I kept them close.

I walked toward the thrall hut and led the new women in, away from the others. Looking them over, I tried different greetings in the languages I knew. They only knew a smattering of Veikal. I'd hoped to have another language to speak with them in, but that could come later. That was another task my master had given me. I was to learn everything I could about the south, starting with languages.

"You will not die if you do as I say," I said. "If you make a mistake, I will sell you at once."

They nodded, terrified of me. I took my strange appearance for granted by now and its effect on people. My skin had darkened since my youth, and my hair had turned a stark, glistening white. My eyes had also lightened, clear like water.

There was no time to explain. What could I say that wouldn't frighten them more? Just the mention of Mornae could send a thrall into a frenzy. It did as much to giants. Instead, I explained what our master expected: cleanliness, order, and early rising. They'd deal only with me. They should not take an order from anyone else but our master.

My chest tightened, hoping beyond hope that they'd obey me.

I handed them new tokens to wear and took their previous owners' collars, tossing them in the fire.

"Wear them on the outside so all may see our master's mark."

I smiled at them to comfort them, but I worried.

"Stay close to me," I reminded them.

I was becoming something my mother had not considered on that terrible night when she'd thought to kill me and had spared me

instead: a minister, a herald, a steward. I wore my thrall token proudly.

She would have despised me for that.

When my master was away on a hunt, I slept in the thrall hut with the women—teaching them, but also learning from them. I never wanted them to think I'd forgotten that token also bound me to our master, even if it was a special one. There were twenty-odd tokens now—the count changed infrequently, but there were always illnesses or accidents to alter it—ten women and ten men. They could not have children. That was my master's simple rule. She didn't want children. Their crying could drive a Baikal to rage.

I made sure the thralls' food had sufficient powdered thorn from a silverspine bush laced into it. Loga had taught me its primary use of halting their menstrual cycles.

One night, months after I'd bought Chana and Noreh, the women all sat together outside the new thrall hut, working in the sunlight, each with her own task. These women knew much. They were from all over the continent, but we all spoke Yatani together—I'd had them learn it along with Baikal. It gave us something to speak in private. I tried to buy all the Yatani I came across.

I sat at the head, on a log they'd carved and decorated just for me. Thuka, Chana, and Noreh sat nearest me on logs, and the

newer women sat on hides around us. So many more thralls and people supplied an endless source of news and gossip.

“Why are the *rokag* smaller?” I asked during a lull in the chatter. They lived in scattered outposts on both coasts, and raided as far away as the Dragon’s Wings, the ranges of mountains that spread out from the lofty peaks shielding the hidden cities. These were all things these women had taught me. I took it all as truth.

“Not all people can keep their power, Dalis,” Chana said.

Noreh smirked at Chana. “She doesn’t know. I know.” In our company, her muteness vanished.

“Go on,” I said.

“God-favor requires care,” Noreh said, leaning over like she held expert knowledge. “It is like a good cow.”

I frowned.

“It is a beast, Dalis,” Noreh explained. “It gives a lot of milk. More than a yak. And you must breed the cows to have the best.”

The women laughed at Noreh’s analogy. They impressed me with their knowledge. I thought only the Mornae—or the Alcar—knew about power. I also felt not much different from the cow she’d spoken of, but instead of milk, I produced *zaeress*.

“Dalis is no cow,” Thuka said, chiding them. She avoided my gaze, but I knew in her an inexplicable devotion to me.

They stifled their laughter.

“You’re right, *lehsa*,” Chana said to Thuka, using the Ithkan word for *mother*. Chana stroked her arm.

“Dalis is certainly no cow,” Noreh said with a snicker.

Thuka oversaw much of the business of my master’s craftspeople. She’d managed men before, and did it well. More like a wife than a chief. The men all called her *wife* in their own languages,

and she didn't contradict them. The women called her their equivalent of *mother* or *sister*.

"It is like making dyes," Thuka said. "You want the best ingredients, crushed just so, and fine oil, and then there is the cloth. To make true silk, you must have the best of the best. That is how it is. The moment you add lesser ingredients, this happens." She held up a sample on which she was working. It was silk, but bumpy and imperfect. Made from moth castoffs. "Then, people think *this* is silk, and always has been."

I shook my head. "What does this have to do with the *rokag*?"

"They are castoffs, like the Veikal," Chana said.

Noreh hushed her, looking around.

Thuka hushed them all. "There was a time when Baikal roamed these lands alone. They must have been on their way to becoming giants, but not yet. Then the bright ones came, and the Baikal became the giants. Greater than they are now. And then your people changed Vailassa. All peoples change. But then came the Fall of Saylassa. More change than any tribe or empire could manage. That affected everyone. Even down south in my lands."

"We had power, too," Chana said. "The elders still tell the stories."

"What kind of power?" I asked.

Chana set her work down, her hands flat on the cloth. "Sayin's power, Dalis. And that of others. We're not like the Children of Sayin, bound to the sun. Not like the Alcar, the bright ones."

The Alcar. My people had originated from them.

She looked up to the sky, closing her eyes as the sunlight breaking through the trees dotted her face. "We had our own powers, our own gods. But Sayin is abundant, and we all took in his power, changed by it over countless generations. When the bright ones fell to dust, everyone suffered."

Noreh, excited and impatient with Chana's discourse, said, "I heard the chief had one of the green-eyed magus tell him which woman to pick for his mate."

The new women hissed. Others waved at the air, clearing it of evil spirits.

"What does that matter?" I asked.

"They are strange men. Only men," Noreh said. "They know things about every tribe that ever walked the earth. They can read any living thing like they are scrolls."

Thuka scoffed. "Just stories. I never saw one."

But other women insisted it was true.

"They have milk-green eyes," Noreh said, "Some light and some dark. But it's always the green that sets them apart."

Others nodded.

"They lived in Kopsis," volunteered a new woman. Holi was her name. "The city closest to Ithka. On the Dragon's Belly."

"I heard the chief used one," Noreh said.

The others nodded and agreed.

Chana shook her head. "Well, it's clear he made an excellent choice in mate, given the size of the twins."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"These green-eyed men help pick mates," Noreh said. "They know the best ones, the god-favored."

"There was one in my village," said a girl from the western coast of southern Vailassa. A mousy thing, half a head shorter than the Yatani women. "But he just told the elders which ram to breed with the ewes. And cows, too. He liked horses the most. He came through just before spring. The elders paid him, and then he'd leave. They did what he said as if he were Melka himself."

It surprised me how quickly these people, with their own histories and legends, took on the northern gods as their own. She spoke Melka's name like he'd always been her god.

"Yes, but those are the poor ones, sorting cows and sheep," Holi said. "There are others who serve the kings and the empress herself."

"An empress?" I asked.

"She rules six cities."

"Countless people, Dalis," Thuka added. "This empress sits upon a golden dais, and none can see her because she shines so brightly. She has one of these men pick the finest warriors—"

"The most handsome ones," Chana said.

"Yes, the most handsome," Holi said. "They are her guard. These green-eyed men... sons of death!" She spat. "They favor all, but are unfavored themselves."

I frowned.

Holi blushed. "They have no gifts, Dalis. No power."

"Not that we can see," said another.

"The chief must have used one to pick the twins' mother."

"I heard he had a woman before this, and even children, but they were weak."

"What happened to them?" I asked.

The woman shrugged.

I'd always thought the rune bones and the god-words I spoke had set our fate, but the reality was much deeper, the chief's plan much deeper.

I was an accident of fate.

I recalled the night I'd tossed the bones. The looks between Hendar and Rigid. What had they known? Uncertainty swept through me.

“I heard a remnant of the Red Boar swept the border and skirmished with the Yellows,” Chana said. “But there are so many Yellows. And none of the real shamans would aid the Reds.”

“It doesn’t seem wise to reject the Reds,” I said. “Given your example of the cows and silk. The Reds are still Baikal, even if there are only a dozen left.”

“I don’t know, Dalis,” Thuka said. “I’ve yet to know a wise chief.”

A sadness weighed on me as they continued chatting. The world was changing so quickly. It was not my people’s way. We took our time—over centuries and cycles. My master needed me more than ever, and I needed her. We all did. She was the bulwark that let us live so well amidst so much ill. My power, even, was a net cast into a river, wide and aimless until it caught on something and pulled me in. That still happened. Even now I needed to cast the net over these women and plumb their depths. But it was dangerous, too. I couldn’t let them see me weakened, lost in thought... lost in the vastness of their being. But to what end? I was worse than a famished piglet. I hadn’t been serving my master as I should, but as I wanted. Instead of making a pleasant household for her, I should hone my skill. If a green-eyed magus had helped the chief select a mate, what else had the chief done, and what else was he planning?

What did Yorl know?

“Please be careful,” I said to them, pausing their conversation. “Learn what you can, but keep to the master’s huts as much as you can.”

They agreed, but it did not ease my worry. I felt a great need to keep them all safe.

Thuka clicked her tongue. “She is strong, Dalis. No need to worry.”

“Our master,” Chana said, as if reading my expression.

“Fain’s skinner,” Thuka said, “told me she eats the heart of her kills on the hunt, just like the men.”

They murmured and shook their heads. I was glad I wasn’t the only one who found it a barbaric practice.

“It is not so strange,” Noreh said. “Among my people, there are stories of women eating the hearts of dragons and turning into one, and then consuming the stars....”

Chana chuckled. “Those are just stories. Our master is real. She eats the flesh, bloody and raw, while it’s hot. It has power.”

I stared down at the stitching before me. Threads clumped together in the fabric, and I’d forgotten to stroke them as Loga had ordered me so long ago. It troubled me that I had learned things I should already know about my master from these women. I’d always assumed the blood on her was from the hunt itself, or a battle. Not that she’d dribbled blood on herself while eating her kill. I shivered.

“Dalis, is there no power in the beasts?”

I nodded. “In some. I don’t know about blood, though.”

They whispered and murmured to each other.

“Our master has thirty-six in her household now,” Chana said. “But Yorl has one hundred.”

Noreh shook her head. “She should buy those Ithkans that came in a week ago. I saw them brought in. One of Dalis’s bracelets could buy them.”

“You want our master to buy more thralls?” I asked.

“She should raid more, too,” Holi said.

I hid my astonishment. They saw our master as a weapon against their enemies and had already resigned themselves to life here. They’d seen the horrors of being a Baikal thrall, but in my master’s care they felt safe and comfortable. I made sure of it. Baikal, and even most Veikal, did not enter the thrall quarters; here,

they could be free of fear. My master didn't mind if they crafted the things she liked.

"This is better than home, Dalis," Chana said, seeing my expression. "The Kaumani and others plundered my village many times. Women taken as slaves. Raped."

"Half my village was indebted to the warlord sent by Ahzhal," said Noreh. "No better than thralls."

Sadness filled her. It spread through all of them.

"There must be happy places somewhere, Dalis?" Noreh asked.

The men were sitting along the edges of our group, having abandoned their fire to listen to the women. What tragedies had befallen them?

The Mornae were mighty, but treacherous. Or were they? My mother had thought so. Since the Fall, they'd become timid, hiding in the crater. Once, they may have been the perfect seekers of hidden knowledge, as lovely as any creature had the right to be. Pettiness, cruelty, and hatred had marred that beauty, though. My mother had called them lazy. Time changed all peoples.

I wanted to say something hopeful, but I couldn't lie. "I don't know of one."

"Here," Thuka said firmly. "This here is happy for now."

They grasped each other's hands, smiling and laughing. The men didn't, though. They saw more of what happened outside the bounds of my master's household. Still, they brightened for a moment to hear the women's joy.

I held onto the sensations of the women's joy, feeding on it. But all was not well, despite my effort to create a lake of peace amid the raging sea of the Baikal.

More Baikal and Veikal were coming to Zelaugr lands, looking to join the chief's tribe. They spoke of gathering a mighty army to cross the Moon Sea, conquer the invaders, and plunder the hidden cities. If Trosgan was behind the talk, he never said it in public.

My master struggled to find supporters.

Worry racked me. Day and night, I dreaded that someday they'd sound the gongs and announce her death. What would I do if that happened?

I'd run.

Could I? Could I leave those I'd protected and cared for?

Deep down, I decided: House above all. I couldn't sacrifice my house, my mother's heritage, for them. A hardness came over me when I considered discarding all those around me and the life I'd made for myself among the Baikal. There was a truth to it as bright as the goddess's own light.

It saddened me to feel this way, and the feelings clouded my power.

"Dalis is drooping," Chana would say to me.

"Stop annoying her," Noreh would reply, nudging her friend. She'd pat my arm.

One evening around the yard fire, as I watched from the edge of a hut, one of the new elders—one my master had been winning over—dared touch my master in front of others, and she allowed it. Many of the Baikal were from distant tribes and had never seen a daughter of Aelath. To see her kissing this one, one of their own, set the others ablaze with desire.

His hands pulled at her garments, searching her out, and she chuckled. When she'd had enough, she pushed him aside and he rolled back, half-taken with drink. He was shorter than her, but wide, with an unappealing gut. He commanded a troop of Baikal, ten more warriors to support her.

The others watched, hoping she'd choose one of them next. Rumors about her abounded through the tribes. I knew this public display was part of her plan to win them over, to show them what she could offer the chiefs among them.

A touch startled me. A powerful hand wrapped around my arm, and I whipped about. The Veikal loomed over me. His breath reeked of their bitter drink, and his feelings invaded me in a rush of lust and craving. I knew they thought me beautiful, but in the way they set aside beautiful things for their gods, not like a common thing.

I'd been wrong.

He tore my garment open, and shadows crept up my form to protect me. Panic had a way of dissipating my power, and the shell rose to my knees and collapsed. I struggled, but he was far too strong and lifted me up. Panic spread through me. All around, the Veikal of these tribes grabbed thralls. A frenzy had begun, triggered by my master's display.

A familiar hand gripped my attacker's skull. The man's face stretched and collapsed before my eyes, his skin separating from his

mouth and eyes and nose. Blood spurted at me. His hands trembled on my skin as he released me.

I closed my eyes.

I didn't need to see.

I felt it all.

My master tore him apart. I'd heard stories about how strong she was on raids and hunts, but this was a man with a strength of his own.

It didn't matter. I slumped down against the hut wall.

The camp had become silent except for the thralls scurrying away.

Chana and Noreh must have been watching. They rushed to my side, helping me up and covering me with a blanket.

My master stood by the fire. Blood covered her, the man's limbs in each hand. She tilted her head up, bathing in Cassan's faint light. Blood rage still coursed through her. Her body shuddered with each breath, muscles rippling, wanting to fight more.

She tossed the limbs into the fire. The skin and fat crackled and hissed. She shook the blood from her hands, still gulping air. Tonn and Malgog stood nearby, holding up her weapons. Tensions rose. She smirked, tore off a silver ring from her forearm, and tossed it to the Veikal's liege.

"For your man," she said.

The Baikal, his Blue Tusk tribal mark tattooed on his chest, caught the ring, but he stood defiant, gripping his axe.

Chana and Noreh bade me retreat to the hut, but I would not. My master had prevented harm to me, but this was the first time she'd killed for me.

Blue Tusk stood to support their tribesman. Soon, everyone around the fire was standing. Fain and Womtha were not keen to

fight these Baikal. Still, they stood beside my master, their axes and hammers in hand.

“It is more than enough. Generous even,” Womtha said. His white eyes glowed orange in the firelight. Indeed, all of him blazed like a setting sun.

My master’s rage had settled, and she stood there, stern and unmoving.

“It is generous,” a Blue Tusk said. He wore three tusks, small ones. Their paint was chipping.

Fain cleared his throat. “The gods curse anyone, even his bloodline, for a thousand years just for touching a daemon of the Dark Goddess. Sky and earth, even the sea, will have no part in it.”

“Very generous,” Womtha repeated.

The dead man’s liege looked around, realizing that my master’s warriors outnumbered him. His servant’s actions had cursed him.

He handed the silver to Womtha.

“This was not my man,” he declared. He glanced up at the sky, searching for signs of disfavor. “I knew him not.” He avoided looking my master in the eye.

Womtha handed the silver back to my master, who slid the ring back upon her arm.

The Blue Tusk and their supporters cleared the fire, leaving my master to enjoy it with hers.

She sat with blood dripping from her, drinking ale, but her eyes were dark, displeased. My master preferred a bloodless domination of these new clans, but she must defend what was hers.

It was the first time anyone had dared touch me. She’d defended me, but I feared for my master and all of us who’d set our fate with hers. The oracle’s power was fading. Soon, none would believe it or

care that she owned a relic of the Dark Goddess. Or that she herself was a good omen, hope of the Baikal.

I trembled for days. Chana and Noreh cared for me.

It didn't take long for swarms of Yellow Tusks, Boars, Bears, and Claws—and others like the distant Blues—to fill and swell the Flats at the base of the Zelaugr's hills and forests.

Trosgan had a stone seat built for himself on an outcropping. From that height, he could see the gathered tribes. Below his seat, his folk had felled trees with the shamans' blessing—part of the tree dedicated to Melka in a secret ritual. A vast expanse, larger than the chief's yard up in the hills, held hundreds of giants and smaller folk. A line of his warriors stood in front of his seat, and other lines of warriors kept a square area the size of my master's yard clear of squatters, their hunting spears upright.

Dozens had gathered to see him. Trosgan's power was on display. Again, he surprised me. I had read none of this in him.

Trosgan sat pensively upon this new throne. To his left and right, the twins stood by the stone platform, receiving pledges. The chief earned the largest number of pledges, but everyone counted anything of his as Yorl's. It made no sense that the Zelaugr's power was split between the twins. I sometimes wondered why the chief feared his daughter so much. Maybe it was because she had a power Yorl did not. He played a careful game with her.

These Moon Sea Baikal were difficult to read, and I struggled to get hold of their thoughts while distracted by the chief and Yorl.

Guilt plagued me. I'd missed so much. Yorl's cunning, Hiltham's betrayal, Loga's attachment to a Red. I'd taken them all for granted, assuming I knew them. They'd proved to have deeper minds than I'd suspected.

My power flowed more easily when it focused on one or two Baikal at a time, a handful at the most. My master seized my concentration, as did the shamans, and the more I concentrated, the more I felt myself entangled with them. Still, I tried to focus only on the ones stepping forward to speak to the chief or make a pledge.

One by one, clan elders came forward to pledge themselves. Most Baikal clans shared a tribal name. The Fall of Saylassa had fractured them, and they'd become bands or just a group made up of family, brothers, or cousins. Sometimes, there was a single Baikal, ragged and poor, who still upheld the name of a long-forgotten tribe. A Baikal was poorest when he'd no clan or tribe.

Choice made clan rather than blood. Any elder who received sufficient pledges—the gods alone knew the number—could style themselves a clan leader, claiming lands, pronouncing judgements for its members, making deals with other clans, and keeping warriors at the ready. A clan leader was a kind of chief, but the Baikal used that word only for those strong enough to receive pledges from clans. Truth be told, their politics were never clear to me, and they shifted from one moment to the next. A single clan elder could change the flow of power, as had happened with the Reds.

A ragged-looking, ten-foot Baikal stepped to the rise.

"Only Baikal speak before the rise," Yorl said, his face twisted.

An ancient rage flared in the man.

“And that I am, young one. I’ve more victories than you.” The man tottered another step forward. Yorl looked to his father for permission to break the man in two.

Trosgan’s gaze drifted, and his thick lips puckered. “You’re a Blue Bear Claw. Where’s your chief?”

“I’m all that’s left, Great Chief.”

The crowd shifted and murmured.

“Let him pledge!”

“Let him go into the forest.”

“To the Whites with him.”

Trosgan raised his hand. “My son, what would you have me do with this man who could not keep his bloodline from falling?”

“It’s a curse,” someone muttered near me.

Baikal never wanted to be the last of their clan. Who’d want that burden?

I was glad my master was not alone. She might not have so many pledges, but she still had the Baikal of her youth backing her: Fain and Womtha, Timoth and his clan. She had a good household and good thralls.

“Still, he *is* a Bear Claw,” Trosgan said, irritated. He waved away the talk of curses and ill omens, Whites and forest spirits.

“Whose favor do you seek, then?” Yorl asked, his face set in a deep frown. He didn’t want the man. My master must not have looked enthusiastic either.

“I pledge to you, Great Chief,” the man said in a faint voice.

Trosgan nodded and waved the man off. “Can’t go about killing Baikal,” he whispered to Yorl. “Not now.”

The shamans rattled their charm sticks as a band of Baikal pushed through the crowd. For a moment, my heart leapt. The leader looked like Hendar, with a thick, bushy beard covering his

entire face. His scarlet hair, a frothy bush running from front to back, stood out in that crowd. But this Baikal's eyes were blue like my master's, and he had a different manner, his eyes less gleeful. Still, he was thick with muscle like Hendar, and inches taller, unless my memory failed me. Or it was just all the hides and furs he wore strapped to his chest that made him look more massive. He'd earrings of stone and silver, and he sheared his hair on the sides. Tattoos of beasts wrangled with each other around his skull. He'd scars on his face as well, not from injuries but carved purposefully into the shape of spear tips or starbursts. I'd never seen a Baikal like him.

Those gathered had also never seen someone like this. They crammed into the sides of the yard to make room for him and his folk.

"Great Chief," the newcomer said after taking his time to look about, inspecting the pledges. He'd said it more like a question, a ridicule. His own Baikal formed a wall around his back, all fierce and gruff.

Trosgan cleared his throat. "Have you come to make amends like your uncle?"

"I am," the Baikal said, as if he was doing Trosgan a favor.

"Well, get on with it," the chief muttered to himself.

"I am Fennir," he said to the assembly, "of the Black Bear."

Murmurs and shuffling.

He looked at my master. "And I pledge myself to the daughter of Aelath."

Trosgan sat up. Yorl snorted.

"There are no Black Bears," Trosgan said. "They all pledged to the Wolf, to Rothmin's seed. That's the oath."

Fennir shook his head. "Made by my father's father. Not by me."

“Your uncle agreed.”

“He doesn’t speak for anyone but himself.”

I liked this Fennir already. There were those amongst the smaller clans glad to see someone of name and stature challenging Trosgan. There’d been far too much groveling. By now, I’d learned more of the intricacies of Baikal pledging—not that it never made sense to me. Fennir had pledged himself to my master. Not to her tribe and not to her chief, just to her. That was intolerable to Trosgan. The Reds had already caused him enough trouble. The last thing he wanted was treachery coming to him from the tribes he’d already counted on as allies.

More Baikal, his clan, shouldered in behind this man. I scanned them, but in far too rushed a manner. They squinted, scouring every face. They were Fennir’s sons, cousins, and a pack of loose ends.

Fennir had no mate. That was foremost in their minds. But there was something else. He was searching the ridge for me. Or someone like me.

Yorl straightened, throwing back his broad shoulders—a habit with Baikal to make themselves look as intimidating as possible. “The Blacks are all Zelaugr now.”

Fennir didn’t look at Yorl. “We’re the Bear.”

Trosgan’s fists tightened.

“We’ll have it out now,” Yorl said, holding out his hand for his new hammer.

Fennir chuckled. “Boy, you couldn’t touch me if you tried.” Fennir drew aside his cloak. Black metal globes—not the usual *boka* crystal—covered his chest. A hush fell over the assembly. Yorl frowned, unsure.

“Enough of this!” Trosgan said. As much as he despised Fennir, he needed to somehow keep the man on his side. “Daughter of

Aelath,” he said, “what do you say to these Black Bear?”

She shifted, ill at ease. She’d been trying to gain a supporter to attract others, but Black Bear support would pit her *against* other clans.

“I’ll meet with him and then decide.”

“Wise, Aelaku,” Fennir said, a crooked smile flashing through his beard. While the Baikal, including his own people, had a rising rage in them, Fennir remained cool, in control of himself. “We have much in common. You’ll see.”

“Your folk may camp in the forest near my stead,” my master said. “But not within a hundred lengths.” Far enough. One length was the height of a true Baikal—fifteen feet.

“I accept!” A familiar, broad smile spread across his face. And then, as quickly as it had spread, it vanished. He gave parting glances to Yorl and Trosgan, and then he shouldered past his people and out of the yard.

My master turned back to Malgog. “Keep watch on them.”

Malgog nodded and left. She glanced at me, and then turned back to the assembly.

“Foul winds,” muttered the chief. “Never should have let him back in.” He peered at me, pulling at his beard.

More Yellows piled into the yard—there seemed to be no end to them. The chief accepted their pledges and doled out sections of the Flats and rights to certain woods, streams, rivers, and even rock.

No others pledged themselves to my master that day.

That night, my master and her band of warriors and hunters set out into the forest to meet with Fennir and his Black Bear.

I went as well, but covered head to toe in a thick cloak and scarf. Only my eyes were visible, along with my gray hands clutching at the folds of cloth.

It was a starlit night, a rarity that no moon sat above us. The best of nights for parley, without the gods meddling. That didn't stop them from bringing their relics and god-words though.

Torches guided us, crackling and licking at the darkness. I walked between Tonn and Malgog. My master ordered them to carry me away if things went wrong. I should not resist. She carried her weapons, as did her warriors. Her band was comprised of eight veteran elders. It was not always easy for them to remain steadfast. They'd households of their own, and by pledging themselves to her, they'd set themselves at odds with Yorl. Still, they stayed because they saw her as the stronger of the twins. She'd lost supporters to the Reds, however, so she'd meet with this rebel to shore up her losses. He'd at least twenty experienced warriors pledged to him.

Fennir's people had occupied a clearing in the forest and only hauled in fallen trees for firewood—respecting Melka and his

shaman. Two large fires burned on either side of Fennir, who sat on a stone slab. Across from him, they'd placed another slab.

"Welcome, Aelaku," he said, his eyes sparkling but his lips not smiling.

Her men fanned out.

"Please, sit. Let us talk."

Did he mean to dominate her? To make her his puppet? My gut churned.

"I won't speak for the Black Bear in the moot," she said.

Fennir chuckled. "We don't need you to. It's done. We've set our marks again."

"The chief won't like that. Not after what happened with the Reds. He'll take it wrong."

He motioned again to the stone.

"You have no shaman?" she asked.

Fennir shook his head. "They've stayed back at my stead. And you?"

She shook her head.

"But you've no need for one, do you? You speak your own god-word. Aelath must love you best of all." He admired her exposed limbs. "I would worship you, Aela." His words didn't move her. "And a second word, I hear."

She motioned me forward, and I removed the scarf from my face.

His eyes flickered, but he wasn't at all surprised to see a Mornae.

"Good," he whispered. "Very good."

He signaled to someone behind him.

My breath caught in my throat as my master's men drew their weapons. My master's hand slid to the handle of her hammer.

"Easy there," Fennir said, a sly grin pushing out through the bush of beard. "He's mine."

The Mornae man at Fennir's side did not flinch at the remark. He reminded me of my mother—proud, but with an amused look on his face—showing a faint smile, as if everyone there was beneath him; as if everyone was part of the game he was playing, and he was biding his time to make his move.

He looked at me and bowed his head, held there for my blessing.

I raised my hands to my shoulders, but before I could open my hands, he raised his head. His eyes narrowed, as if offended by my effort to function as a priestess.

My master grunted and sat down.

The Mornae man was a head taller than me at seven feet, and dressed in a charcoal-gray wool and felt tunic with a heavy, fur-trimmed cloak draped across his shoulders. Not at all like a thrall, but also not Mornae. The styling seemed more Kuxul. His hair was long on top, gathered in a knot at the back of his head, with the hair on the sides of his head cut close, dark gray shot through with silver. He'd broad shoulders and long, tapered limbs, graceful but strong, like chiseled rock. I searched him out, just at the edges. I couldn't help myself.

His lips pursed, again amused at my stumbling, and I retreated.

He scrutinized me and I flushed. I knew myself to be inadequate as a Mornae acolyte. I felt embarrassed to be me. What could I say for myself after thirty years amongst these barbarous people?

My gaze fell away. I could almost conjure my mother's shame out of the dense forest air.

Then, I realized my smell. Accustomed to living amongst Baikal with their charred meats, firepits, and dangling herb charms... I smelled like the inside of a Baikal hut.

"So, you have one and I have one. That makes us a tribe." Fennir chuckled, but none in his band did. They were ready for a fight—a

gritty bunch, living as nomads. Fennir had talked of a homestead, but I recalled Hendar's thrall hut. It'd been of inferior quality, not at all like the Zelaugr's. I'd had nothing to compare it to, then. The stead Fennir spoke of must have been that one—more a hunter's lodge than a proper village.

These Baikal were gruff, clothed for travel and sleeping without fires. True to their clan's name, they wore bear fur, but also patchworks of whatever pelts and hides they could fashion together.

"Why pledge yourself to me?" my master asked.

His eyes widened. "But Aelaku, you will understand the need to bind our clans, to keep our precious treasures together."

His Mornae thrall again didn't flinch at these words either. He took not the least offense. He must have been party to his master's plan.

"The folk of these tribes are small-minded," Fennir continued. "We've seen the wider world, Aela. Things are happening. We should be ready."

"I've heard the tall tales of golden spears."

Fennir chuckled. "That is my least concern."

"What is your concern, then?"

He leaned forward. "The future, Aela. The future of the Baikal."

"Or the future of the Black Bear."

"Is there a difference?"

She frowned. "I've also heard tales of your rebellion."

"Rebellion? To what? To hold the standard of my tribe? We go back to the beginning. We owe nothing to Rothmin."

"So why come here to pledge?"

"I'm not here to pledge to Rothmin. I'm here to worship you." He grinned again, but his eyes narrowed.

"You've made no marks on Bear territory."

He shrugged. "You're right. Those lands are still the Wolf's. We're trackers, raiders."

"Slavers."

He rubbed his face and snorted. "We make do with what we have. We've scoured the spine of the world, all the way to the White lands. All around the goddess's bowl." He smirked at me.

"You've no rule. You're cut loose. How can I accept your men near mine?" she demanded.

"Those rumors aren't true. You shouldn't listen to stories. Aelath should know the truth of it."

Aelath may or may not, but I did. I scoured Fennir's giants as soon as I sensed a weakness in their minds—save Fennir. With him, I'd need to be more careful. But the other giants' minds were full of dark thoughts of raiding, pillaging, and destroying. That was what they knew. Hendar had been one of them.

I swayed as my gift plumbed their depths. They'd been talking, discussing terms, and setting the bounds. My master liked a well-ordered household, and loyal pledges.

"Your relic is weakening, Aela."

Those in his band chuckled.

She didn't turn to me.

I felt a hand on my back—Dormu. I lifted my chin. That Mornae's eyes were on me, not lingering for too long.

"Fine," she said. "But first, you'll warm my bed."

Fennir's band seemed shocked she'd acted so soon, but he just stood to his full height and raised his head, hands held up to the stars.

"I will worship you, Aelath. I love all the gods, but Aelath above all."

"Bathe first," my master said.

He grunted as he looked at her, his gaze ravenous with desire. She didn't seem to mind.

Bedding was her way of deciding whether she wanted him as more than just a pledge. He had power with him, that was undeniable. After the war with the Reds, she wanted warriors who'd faced real dangers and possessed powers Yorl did not.

Fennir bore metal globes, a rare power, and had strange ways. Anyone who had captured and mastered a Mornae warrior must be worthy of her.

I covered my head again, not even giving the Mornae another glance, not offering any blessing.

"She doesn't like you, daemon," Fennir said to his thrall with a parting chuckle. I resisted laughing and bit my lip. I couldn't deny my curiosity.

No, it was more than that. It was a deep need to know one of my own. I'd been without one for so long. I wasn't sure if I was still Mornae, or if these giants had scooped it out of me after all this time. I felt the stench of my captors inside me: inside my memories, tangled up with my feelings. I couldn't separate myself.

I gripped my cloak, pulling it up close to my lips and covering a smile.

When we returned, my master beckoned me to her hut.

She undressed and washed herself with scented water prepared by her southern thralls.

"Can I trust him?" she asked.

"No, master."

She snarled. "Speak with Fennir's daemon. No more."

She'd have her pleasure with Fennir, but he'd have to do more than worship her to become a pledge. She'd make him earn it.

My master granted Fennir and his clan permission to build huts on her side of Rothmin's Stead. She'd claimed that territory as hers, over time, by her presence. As far as I could understand the giants' ways, that was how it worked. Wherever a Baikal stood was what he ruled—if he could hold it. *Nothing moved a Baikal but death* was the saying. My master extended her territory to her pledges, guaranteeing she'd defend them if necessary, but as with the Reds, loyalty was complex with the Baikal, and few lived on her land.

Soon after Fennir's folk arrived, I walked with Chana and Noreh, foraging alongside the path leading to the south stream. We passed near the Black Bears' huts. They'd not put up a wall, though. My master wouldn't allow it. None of them paused as I passed, even when my little power swept over them like a wind, learning what it could.

The Mornae man watched me from the porch of the only finished hut. A square, silver talisman sat on his chest, and he was well-dressed in dark wools and felts. He'd not just been wearing a costume on the night our masters had first met.

I stopped my searching as our eyes met. I passed behind a pile of cut stone, severing my view of him, and let out deep breaths. It

had taken far too much effort to rein my power in. The shuddering echoes of Baikal and this Mornae filled me.

“What is it, Dalis?” Noreh asked.

Chana looked back to our stead, a plume of smoke rising from one of its roofs. “We should go back.”

“No, no. I’m fine.” I couldn’t tell them that the other Mornae made me nervous. He was a challenge unlike any I’d faced. He required skills of a different kind, and I wasn’t sure I had them.

I walked back out onto the path as I imagined my mother would, untroubled and aloof, though my chest tightened. He could be a spy. An assassin, even. Had they found my house at last? A chill ran through me, sweat building on my upper lip.

We passed the stone pile and two Baikal appeared. They paused and stared down at me, fists clenching and unclenching. One laid a hand on a stone block wrapped in rope as thick as my forearm. His hand gripped it, his knuckles going white. We walked around them.

I glanced back and saw that the Mornae was no longer on the porch. My heart sank. I flushed hard, feeling foolish, and hurried down to the bank. At the stream, I looked back, and he was there, standing at the crest of the path. He smiled at me, but then he vanished as I greeted him. I’d blinked, and a flutter of his presence had rippled through the Dark. I swallowed hard, looking about. My little power flowed out like water from a broken dam, searching, searching.

“Dalis, are you unwell?” Chana asked, taking me by the arm.

“I’m fine,” I said, but I wasn’t. I’d drained myself.

Shadows played in the forest as they had when I’d been a child, threatening. My mother’s stories had always filled me with dread, the way she’d relished talking of vanquishing her enemies. But something unspoken had always veiled the truth, and I wondered

now if I'd ever truly heard her speak about such things... or if it had been my little power making them up.

My mother had been too wise to spill her deepest thoughts to an undeclared child like me.

The sun rose higher, and the shadows hardened to black blades cutting across the forest. Tonn and Malgog emerged from scouting the perimeter and walked like silhouettes on either side of us

It startled me when my concern shifted from my people to this stranger.

I wanted to see him again.

The next time we walked past the Black Bear's stead, the Mornae man was not on the porch. He was not anywhere.

They'd finished building Fennir's hut, with two others nearing completion. They had the look of permanence, unlike the hut Hendar had kept me in. More folk worked on them, having come down from the hills and mountains beyond the Horn. They only had Veikal women. These were taller than the Wolf's, or any others I'd seen, but still had the same awkwardness in their bones. They hid when we approached, peering at us from their hiding places.

I'd brought Timoth and Darron as guards. They enjoyed being in the woods. Timoth came from a respected line of Melka's shamans, and Darron's own father was their senior shaman. They'd come equipped with ironwood javelins and hand axes.

Timoth grunted as we neared the stream. I huddled together with Chana and Noreh as the two giants rushed around us.

The Mornae man was leaning against a rock as if he'd been waiting for us. He held out his hands, keeping them low. Timoth and Darron were snorting and stomping their feet already, but the Mornae man seemed unconcerned by their display.

I slipped between the giants. “Goddess, favor you.” I spoke to the Mornae in Baikal, to not rouse suspicion in my guards. It was not a proper greeting, but the only one I could manage.

My excitement was clear, I’m sure. His lips quivered as if he had a torrent to speak, but held back. He’d been brash at the meeting between our masters, but now he seemed different, almost humble. He held out his hands, palms up, seeking my blessing. If he was an assassin, he was either a master or a novice—though I knew nothing about assassins.

I glanced left and right; the entourage watched my every move. I raised my hands to my chest, palms out. I didn’t know if it was right, but at that moment, it seemed acceptable. My mother would have called it unwise, given that I didn’t know his house. He could be an enemy, for all I knew. My mother had left a wake of chaos at her exile, and Mornae had long memories.

Vengeance today or in ten cycles was the saying.

But I didn’t care. I wanted him to know what it meant to me to meet another Mornae.

He raised his hands—long-fingered, strong but fine, wrapped in wide *kithaun* rings—to his chest.

“Thank you, Face of the Goddess,” he replied in Baikal, respecting my decision. His voice was deep and smooth. I’d forgotten how melodic Mornae voices could be.

I was no priestess, but I didn’t contradict him. It served me that the entourage, my master’s household, thought me a priestess.

“We may speak,” I said. Need tinged my voice.

He smirked, giving that same look as at the meeting. He had my attention, and we both knew it. My frustration with the matter must have seeped out because his face softened.

“May I follow you to the stream?” he asked. “I have knowledge of plants.”

I nodded, but also motioned that he should walk an arm’s length from me.

“Make yourself useful,” I said.

He chuckled. “But first, names. It’s only proper.”

And dangerous. I waited for him to offer his first. My guards stepped forward as he neared.

“Not too close, daemon,” Timoth muttered.

The stranger kept his hands low and open, like he intended to reveal everything to me.

“I am Nevaun.” No house name. An exile or an assassin, it seemed.

“I am Jassae.”

His eyes narrowed. He motioned to the path, offering me the first step.

My guards grunted for me to continue. Behind me, Chana and Noreh whispered. They found this Mornae very handsome—godly, even. It was still so strange to me, how they saw us. My mother had taught me that all Mornae were lovely to other people, but what mattered most to them was the command and practice of power. Beauty was only one sign, and often the easiest one. *It fades last*, she’d have said, bitterness in every word.

“I will defend her with my life,” Nevaun said to Timoth in flawless Baikal. Even adding a grunt and a snort at the end. His chest puffed out for emphasis.

Timoth gave a low snarl. “We’ll see about that. Arm’s length apart.”

We reached the stream and began picking. I stole glances at him. He kept his eyes on the ground, picking all the useful plants. Closer

now, I took greater notice of him. White tattoos blazed with goddess-light under the close-cropped, dark gray and silver hair, the signs of a sorcerer. He'd tucked knives of all sizes throughout his person. He seemed well-prepared to fight.

His face seemed young, like me, but I suspected he was much older. Age is always a deceptive measurement with Mornae. *Zaeress* radiated from him differently than in my mother, though. The greatest practitioners of the Dark had bones like the night sky, black and sparkling. He confounded my efforts to ascertain his age. I guessed it was for this reason.

Everything about this man seemed intentional, careful. I felt like a child beside him, and to him, I was.

So began my time with a companion more like myself, but more dangerous. I kept my thoughts and feelings hidden if I could.

Days later, Nevaun and I walked together along the path to Forthai's meadow, where the sourblossoms grew. They were the only thing I'd found to heal her bruises. My master could stuff down the pain, but her body often betrayed her.

"This one is good for clearing the lungs," Nevaun said in Mornae, reaching down and brushing the tops of ordinary weeds with his fingertips.

"How do you know so much about plants?" He made no comment on the roughness of my speech. After living among Baikal for so long, everything about me seemed rough and crude.

"Fennir's clan has some of Melka's shamans and old knowledge. They weren't always such brutes."

"You seem at ease with insulting them."

"And you with defending them."

I stopped, shocked he'd say that to me, but he was right. My mother would have approved.

He took a deep breath. "Our situation is unique."

I nodded once. It had been forever since I'd talked to anyone this way.

“How did you come to be with Fennir?” I asked. I wouldn’t ask about his time before that. That would ask too much of a Mornae. It was only fair, in my mind, that we should know an equal amount about each other. How we’d become captives of the Baikal seemed a fair exchange.

Everyone knew my story, at least from the day Hendar had presented me at the moot to the daughter of Aelath. What came before that, I’d told no one, and people made up their own stories of how Hendar had caught me like a bird in a trap.

Silence settled between us.

“I’ll go to the pyre with it,” I said. “I swear it.”

He smiled at me. His eyes were bright, but cautious. “Very well,” he said. “I was being hunted by rivals, and they drove me close to Black Bear lands.”

I admired him for not naming his rivals, not bemoaning his fate. Bitterness found no home in him like it had in my mother. With her, it had been a sharp blade that cut at anyone who sought to know her. Nevaun was still fighting, however. He’d not given up.

“Weary and spent, I took down as many as I could. Still, they came.”

We walked over the meadow and picked a handful of the mature sourblossoms. He knew the ones to pick without me telling him. I opened the sack, and he dropped them in.

“Then, Fennir appeared. Fennir... the Black Bears are of old Baikal blood, and still have power. They fought off my rivals. He fought them for sport. He was also young then, and wanted to make his name known. His father already chafed against the Wolf’s lordship over them. He’d be the same. And, as his uncle Hendar would do years later, he saw an opportunity. Fennir desired to understand the goddess.”

“You made his globes. The metal ones.”

He chuckled. “Maybe.”

“What happened then?”

“The Black Bear could have killed me. Instead, they took me to those of the forest, and there in Melka’s secret grove, the god healed me. When I woke, Fennir offered me a place in his clan, but said I’d have to wear the token.”

“He *offered* it to you?” My heart raced. I hadn’t been as foolish as I’d thought to accept Hendar’s token, and I’d been a child. Nevaun was a grown man, a sorcerer, and a knight.

“He promised I wouldn’t be an actual thrall. We made an exchange. I would help him master forgotten power, and he would provide a place for me... a house.”

He chuckled, a hard look on his face. I knew it well. To be apart from one’s house—from the seat of power, from the Temple and all our people had built—was to walk in the world like a lifeless shadow. A ghost. The Baikal were not wrong in calling us daemons.

He gazed over the meadow, squinting, alert to dangers I couldn’t perceive. “He’s kept his promise to me, and I have kept mine to him.”

I’d received no promise except for Hendar’s, and he’d left me. And my master took me as a given. There’d never been words like that exchanged between us, no agreement or arrangement. I was a thrall.

“Tell me about these,” I said, motioning to the white tattoos on his head and wrapping about his bare arms. They rose like swollen scars from his gray skin and must blaze with goddess-light when he worked his power.

“I shouldn’t.” He still felt bound to the unspoken rules of our people, even though they’d cast him out. But he gave in to my

curiosity. "Each one signifies a rank I've achieved and milestones within those ranks."

"How many ranks are there?"

Again, he shook his head.

"Sorcerer secrets?"

He grinned.

I pressed him. My desire to understand something of my people pushed me beyond what was polite to a Mornae. "If I was your consort, would you tell me?"

He shook his head with a smile. "I can tell you there are as many as there are stars, with a thousand degrees between them."

"How does anyone ever finish?"

"Who said there is an end?"

I frowned, trying to fathom it. "Are there no such degrees and ranks for priestesses?" I knew there were high priestesses and voices, but nothing beyond that. It was also a mystery to me how one achieved even those two.

"If there are, none have told me," he said with a smirk.

"More secrets?"

He laughed, and my breast warmed. His voice was clear and smooth, inviting.

"So, you're a diviner... a sorcerer?" I asked.

"I am a knight. All Mornae knights become what you call a sorcerer. Mastery of the spear is the first form of power. Diviners are knights dedicated to the study of the Dark. I was a diviner after my knighting."

Excitement swelled in me. Here at last, someone to tell me about my homeland. A knight! A diviner steeped in the history of our people!

"Until the purges?" I asked.

His brow lifted—another might not have noticed, but there was also the slightest twinge through his frame.

“I learned things from my mother,” I said. “I’ll ask no more. We have not consorted. You owe me nothing.”

The mention of a consort didn’t faze him. He turned to me with his cupped hands full of sourblossoms. His gaze devoured me, and I let it. Who had captured whom? One moment it was him, and another it was me.

“It is all quite tedious,” he whispered. “In the days before the Fall, a council of diviners—those of the highest ranks—oversaw such things. I once knew a sorcerer of the tenth rank. Others reached even higher. But it was all secret.”

“To know your opponent’s power is the first step in defeating her,” I said, quoting something my mother had told me.

“Matron Feyra spoke true. Your mother was wise, sharing her wisdom with you. Yes, our people kept things well hidden to reduce jealousy and rivalry. In the beginning, our people sought to know and learn, alone with their own kin. It was only later that the conflicts started.”

“How long does it take to achieve a degree?”

He grinned and shrugged. “That will depend on the man. And the goddess.”

I grew quiet, considering the cycles my mother had lived and how exceedingly long these sorcerers must have lived. They accepted no consort and usually had no children. Their power never diluted, like a priestess’s would be upon giving her house an heiress and with every child after that. Sorcerers focused on their practice, on tools for their houses to cut and shape the purest kith, imbue blades and rings, and achieve other impressive feats of power. It was the entire purpose of our people to push the bounds of those ranks and

degrees, claiming the constellations of power for ourselves. Women did it in their way, and men did it in theirs.

“Thank you for telling me these things,” I said.

He bowed his head, palms to his shoulders. He’d performed a sacred task in teaching me. I considered he was a sacred vessel, containing truths known only to those who had lived before the purges and the Fall. I wanted nothing to disturb us because I wanted him to tell me everything.

In time.

There was so much more I wanted to discuss, but I had to take care. I couldn’t trust him. I was weary of keeping my power bottled up, but I didn’t want to offend him by sifting through his feelings and memories.

I focused on picking more blossoms. There’d be time for more questions later.

One night, as the Spearman constellation took the place of honor in the night sky and Barona, the Mother Bear, slipped away into the west, my master's household gathered to celebrate a hunt. She much preferred hunts to raids—though she was a brutal fighter.

My master sat on the ground at the foot of her porch, and her followers adjusted so they could all face her. Wherever she sat was the place of honor in her yard. She'd taken to rule more easily than I'd ever expected. Unlike her father, who sat *on* the porch, above his pledges, she sat at the same level as hers.

Her yard was less full than Trosgan's or Yorl's, but everyone in it was someone she trusted—as far as she could trust anyone. And they valued the crafts that flowed out of her huts: the silks, cloths, embroidery, etched silver and iron, singed leathers, and all the rest. She'd even started a forge to make steel, as they did in the south.

I stood at her left shoulder beside her throwing axe, the haft of which was the length of my thigh. I knew to move if she reached for it. Her two-handed hammer stood closer at her right knee, its square head to the ground—welcoming of peace, but ever ready for an attack. She sat apart, though, removed from the circle of her

supporters. They drank, laughed, cheered, and roared. She watched.

And I searched—for treachery, betrayal... the slightest signs of trouble.

“Does he touch you?” she asked me.

“No, master.”

She grunted. “What does he say?”

I couldn’t hesitate, and I couldn’t censor myself. She’d know the difference.

“He’s told me of how he came to be Fennir’s thrall,” I answered.

“Fennir says he found him in a ditch, half dead. Bald as a baby’s ass. Shining like a fallen star.”

“That is true, master.”

She’d been with Fennir often. When he warmed her bed, they’d talk until dawn. But she didn’t seem to care more for him than any other elder she bedded. Not like me at all. My chest kindled thinking of Nevaun, remembering his eyes and the shape of his lips when he smirked at my ignorance, and the rest of him...

“Fennir’s thrall makes blacksteel globes,” she said. “They say he gives Fennir secret power.”

“Yes, master. The thrall is a sorcerer of my people. It is his art.”

“A useful daemon.”

I bowed my head, accepting the insult. I’d done little to help her. My talent seemed more of a curse. Nothing ever went her way for long.

“But I won’t wear such things.” She shifted. A fight was on the verge of breaking out. My gift charged into them, searching.

“What is this talk of hunting Mahwir in the west?” she asked them.

None had seen Mahwir, the great boar, in a cycle. Mahwir's brood was what they hunted now, but the great boar was a giant like themselves—the size of a hut, according to their stories.

“Fennir says Mahwir runs in the west,” Fain said. “In Red territory.”

Timoth snorted. “It was Mahwir that drove the Reds to action against the Zelaugr.”

“Next he will say Barona walks the Horn,” she said.

They wanted to believe it, though, even though she meant it as a joke. They thought everything she spoke was a divine portent.

“He says he'll bring you Mahwir's hide as proof,” Timoth said.

Her supporters grimaced. If Fennir brought her such a gift, what could they do? They'd be beholden to Fennir. She'd only seek him then, a worthy mate for the Daughter of Aelath.

She chuckled. “I'd rather Mahwir run wild as a god should, but if anyone will kill him, let it be me.”

They thumped their feet on the bare earth, setting it to rumbling. My legs quivered.

She leaned back, and they continued chattering about Mahwir and the great hunt it would be.

“They say the thrall can fight,” she said to me. “Fennir lets him fight.”

“I've not seen it, master.”

She held out her mug, and Dormu filled it with the scented waters the southern thralls made. It soothed her and kept her wits intact as everyone else thought she partook of the meads and ales they did.

“Blacksteel, they say.”

“Master?”

“That he fights with blacksteel.”

I hadn't known that, either.

“You spend a lot of time with him.”

“Yes, master.”

“He seems useful.”

I blushed.

A fight broke out—an argument over a Veikal woman in my master’s service.

My master tensed, and I felt the shudder from the soles of her feet through all thirteen feet of bone and muscle.

“Halda will take whom she wants,” she said. She didn’t bellow like her father or brother. Her voice cut like a sudden, frigid wind. Everyone stopped to listen. “Most likely not one of you, either.” She scanned them. “Maybe it will be you, Karn.”

He looked about, wide-eyed, and then he roared. The others shook their heads. How easily she toyed with them all.

She settled back, the sudden surge of power easing into a relaxed state of readiness, her fingers resting on the pommel of her hammer.

“And you,” she said to me, her voice a hoarse whisper. “What would you have of Fennir’s thrall?”

I couldn’t lie, but the words stuck in my mouth.

“He should warm your bed if you desire it.” She drained her mug and fixed her gaze on one of the Black Bear warriors.

I had not even thought that far ahead, but she must have seen it coming.

“Yes, master.”

“If he hurts you,” she said, “I’ll know of it.”

I nodded, a thrill of joy in me.

“Have that one come to my hut at midnight.”

I followed her gaze. Already, she planned to incorporate these renegade Blacks into her clan, if possible. She’d whittle away at

Fennir's supporters until he was her follower rather than their leader.

Nevaun took my hand. We walked up to a clearing in the hills behind the village, where the goddess filled the sky. Only the mountains were higher, with the crests and tips of hills and trees below us. So close was the goddess that I might have brushed her face with my hand.

And Nevaun brushed my face with his hand. To him, the goddess and I must have been the same.

It was the first time we were together.

And not the last.

Every time was hungrier, more desperate than the last. We were strangers, lost and now found. Our own kind, with its own peculiar sensibilities. I could be with him as I was with no other. I felt unleashed, unraveled, if only for those nights when we were together. He was beautiful. It was as if we two were the last Mornae alive, the mother and father of a future people. Like Savra and her beloved Kalaron.

We worshipped the goddess; we worshipped her in each other.

In those sweet, fierce moments, I dared hope and dream of something different. Despite the tokens around our necks, we were free.

Nevaun and I spent every dawning of summer like this together—all with permission, of course. And I had to tell my master how it had gone. She'd listen to the wind and know whether he'd pleased me. I was always happy. I was so fortunate for a thrall.

For the first time, my life felt like proper living.

Nevaun taught me Mornaean glyphs as we sat by the meadow stream. With a wet finger, he darkened the stone. The stone dried in the bright sun and the glyph vanished.

“The glyph itself means little,” he said. “An adornment. What matters is the intention.”

“Zaeress?”

He tilted his head, smiling. “Most glyphs function as vessels to hold simple thoughts. Some glyphs can contain as much thought as could cover a mountainside.”

“I’ve only ever known Yatani script.”

“A meager thing in comparison.”

He wrote another glyph, this time with a bit of mud. We watched it dry to a pale gray. I looked about and saw that Timoth was far enough away. I wanted to rub it out.

“Touch it,” he said.

I touched the caking mud. Nothing. I shook my head.

“Close your eyes. Listen.”

I did as he said, quieting my thoughts. A tiny surge of power passed through me as my finger pressed into the mud.

My name is Nevaun.

But it wasn't just words spoken with his voice. There were feelings and sensations. The sun warming his skin, the coolness of the rocks, and the breeze through his hair. The way he looked at me and felt about me. That simple glyph held his entire experience.

I beamed with joyful awe, forgetting my composure. He chuckled.

"Do all Mornae use this?" I asked.

He shook his head and rubbed out the glyph. "Only some. Those with the power still. It is not free, and the more you put in it, the more it takes. Mornae have died putting their thoughts into a glyph, and some have died trying to read one."

My eyes widened.

"Yes, it is true," he said. "They no longer try. That is the fate of our people now." He skipped a flat rock across the stream. "And of these Baikal."

"Not trying?"

"Trosgan is a new man for a new age, a lesser age. Brute and forceful. Soon, the gods will be nothing but superstition. The threads of power forgotten. The god-words a farce. Already, you've seen it."

I nodded.

So many things he shared with me, offering a rapid education I'd been lacking. I resisted the urge to become bitter and angry, to take out on him the wrongs that had happened to me. We'd all suffered from them. I suspected his injuries were even worse than mine. Hunted and attacked by our own people, purged like unwanted vermin. Everything our people had held to for so many cycles, cast out.

So, I invited him to share what he willed, though I knew there must be mountains, a world's worth of information, locked away in him.

He taught me simple things—things any Mornae child raised in Vaidolin would know. Like the names of Vai's phases and their symbols, and the deeper knowledge of the stars and their movements. Stories of the founders, the ideals they'd set. But of what happened after them, and unto the Fall, and the purges... nothing. I didn't press him.

It all seemed unimportant. Instead, I asked him to teach me the forms of reverence made by priestesses, and he asked me whether I knew the goddess's voice. I did not share with him my lessons with Hendar or the events of my mother's death. A priestess should keep her secrets, my mother would have said. Only a consort could know the truth of one's heart.

I dared not seek his feelings. A Mornae might construe it as an attack. Not that my little power didn't try, but it seemed to slide away from him, finding nothing to take hold of. He must have had a strong inner fortress. Being with him relieved me of having to feel what he did not want to share, though. He was a wonderful, delightful mystery to me.

One day, we foraged for mushrooms in the forest behind the stead. The ironwoods, as thick as Baikal, fell seldom, and their trunks proved excellent fertile ground for certain medicinal mushrooms. Melka's shamans forbade any to chop down trees in sacred woods. They named the fallen trees like Mornae named the stars. They'd rot away on the forest floor for centuries.

"You need not struggle so much," Nevaun said to me.

"What do you mean?"

"Your gift. The White Eye."

I paused, clasping the bag of mushrooms to my chest. "You felt it."

He chuckled. "It is the first thing we learn as diviners. How to combat it."

"Should you be sharing that with me?" I blushed. I rampaged with it like a Baikal with his hammer when it should have been a delicate, fine blade to me. A mouse, Hendar had said.

"It is a well-known truth. Before the Fall, only a powerful priestess with the Eye could know even a lowly diviner's thoughts. Once he learned to strengthen his mind, it was impossible to accomplish without harming the target and the priestess alike. Now, it is the opposite. We are no longer what we were. Your little gift is very much indeed."

I looked away, forlorn. I'd hoped he'd say it was small and meaningless, that he'd show me how to stop it.

"My mother—" I said.

"She had the gift. It passes from mother to daughter. For eons, it meant little. Now, it is powerful again since we are all so weak."

"You think this White Eye exiled her?"

I shouldn't have asked that. He was still a stranger to me.

"I could help you," he said.

"I thought it was wrong to instruct on the practice of *zaeress*."

"This would not be instruction. But I can watch over you. Protect you while you seek."

I didn't understand.

"You know the saying about the path?" he asked.

"Every step is a death toward the goddess's glory."

"To see the Dark, one must die or be willing to die. To wield it, you *will* die."

He was speaking metaphorically—this much I knew. But there was a kind of death that only the favored knew. Not returning, becoming so enmeshed, so distant from one's physical self, that one

could wander until the body gave up. No one knew what it was like to return from that.

I stepped closer to him, grasping his vest, and pressed close to him. He wrapped his arms around me and rested his cheek on the crown of my head.

“You must do it, Face of the Goddess. To fulfill your destiny. To prepare for what is coming.”

“What is that?”

“What every priestess must face... the cycles.”

I was a beginner pacing in the Temple’s foyer, not yet received into the chamber of trials, and I’d made a mess of my gift.

“A piece of mountain may become a fine blade, but first you must mine the ore and smelt, forge, and temper it. And finally, someone with skill wields it. It’s no simple thing to be Mornae, something many of our people have forgotten.”

I trembled, and he held me tighter.

One night, after we'd been together under the goddess's light, Nevaun talked about what future we might have together. He spoke like we weren't thralls. He spoke like a Mornae who'd lived long and endured much. For him, so long as he was alive, another cycle awaited.

I remained quiet, listening to his dreaming aloud. I wanted to believe, but there was so much that stood in our way. He remained an enigma to me, but attraction has a way of bending us in ways we don't expect. He was a vessel into which I wanted to pour myself.

"Someday, I'll have my house," I said when he'd paused.

"Yes, you will. I promise it."

His surety was so strange and disconcerting. How could he make that promise to a thrall?

I caressed his face. "But I'm caught up in another's fate. And I spoke it."

"You need not be. You are above these people's concerns."

I drew away. I couldn't separate myself from the Baikal's fears and joys, or their rage and sorrow. Their stench had become a part of me, and I feared what Nevaun would think of me if he knew. "Do our words mean nothing?"

He sat up, listening like a counselor.

“I should have been seeking freedom all along. Like my mother did. She endured at least a cycle of exile, preparing herself to give birth to me, her heiress. Into me, she funneled her effort and reservoir of power, knowledge, and learning. I’ve given all that away just to survive another day. I feel nothing but shame!”

He listened without judging me. “You have power. You are the Face of the Goddess to me. Age doesn’t matter. Now begin the cycles.”

“Not yet.”

He tilted his head.

“I’ve not summoned blue fire.”

He chuckled and shook his head. I’d revealed too much, and I blushed. I didn’t know how they’d done it in my mother’s time, keeping their secrets. Mine seemed to flow out of me at the merest hint of a question.

“I can teach you as much as my mentor taught me,” he promised. “*Zaeress* is not uniform, not the same for all. Yes, every priestess may summon blue fire, but how it comes about, how great or small, and the shape and form of it... even the sound... Power will vary, based on the person. Your *little power*, as you call it, is pouring out through you like light through a glass.”

“I’m exhausted,” I said.

He nodded. “So I’ve heard with the White Eye.”

I pursed my lips and shrugged. “Why can’t I be more like my mother was?”

His tender smile comforted me. “Because you aren’t.”

I shook my head, my eyes prickling.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I am awed by it. I’ve never known someone with it before.”

"I can't control it."

"Why do you *try* to control it?"

I held back the tears. Everything I was doing went against all my mother had told me. Sharing my feelings. Sharing my power.

"I'm weak. They overwhelm me." I wiped my tears.

"May I ask your age?" he asked.

I felt ashamed. Embarrassed. "I'm not yet forty."

His eyes softened. "Lovely," he said. "Truly."

I looked down at my clasped hands. Among our people, I'd have been a priestess-in-training, not yet ready for any important task.

"We're not like them," he said, meaning the Mornae of Vaidolin. "We've had to learn other forms of power. Even me, despite all my training, the learning and practice. I, too, have had to learn from these giants. You know their power?"

"I know their rage," I confessed, relieved to speak of it.

"It can serve you. I suspect it already has. It's an ancient power."

"Rage?"

"Oh, yes. Primitive, but as true as anything of the Dark. I envy you." He gave me a small smile. "But I know it must be a burden."

I nodded and clasped my hands, but then relaxed them. For the first time in so long, I wasn't tense.

"I dread limiting your potential with a careless word," he said. "This gift you have... it is the way it is because you are the way you are. That's how it works."

My mother may have once killed with a thought, but that had been because her gift had manifested in that way. Mine was not that way because I could not yet kill. I wanted something different: peace.

He held my hand. "You shouldn't force it to be anything other than it is."

A thrill of joy filled me. I wanted to reach out and grasp him, hold him, whisper every secret in his ear—and then for him to tell me everything he knew. The feeling swelled, but I stood and walked away. I couldn't let my power flow out, no matter what he said. He didn't know the oracle... or did he? He didn't know that I was already a matron—a matron of thralls. I had my people to think of.

“Don't let it destroy you, Face of the Goddess.”

I paced.

“I mean... it will consume you if you do not learn to let it flow. It will also consume you if you let it flow.” He grinned. “Sometimes, our dreaming self knows better. Like a spearman, you must know to let the goddess rule your movements. None can tame her.”

I didn't understand what he meant. I wanted to, though.

“We live in desperate times, and sometimes the goddess throws us a rope and we must take it to escape the danger below. Anything can be a ladder up the path, a shortcut.”

A ladder. I'd never thought of it like that before.

I looked down the trail. Timoth signaled it was time to go. I walked toward him, so accustomed to obeying.

“Face of the Goddess,” Nevaun said to my back.

I'd forgotten to bless him, to show him he still had my favor. I turned, flushing with embarrassment, my lips tight, and gave him my blessing. I kept my gaze down, avoiding him.

“Next time. Show me?” I asked.

He nodded, a little smirk on his face.

“I’ll watch over you,” Nevaun said. A bed of soft grass awaited me, with no rocks or dangers nearby. He thought I might thrash and considered binding me, but if any marks remained, my master would have his head. I’d risk no harm to him, though I wondered if Nevaun could defeat her. I’d also not risk her raging because of me. I felt, somehow, that the trust we had would vanish if she ever turned her power on me.

“Let’s begin.” He beckoned me to lie down.

I knelt there with his hands in mine. I grasped them, running my own fingers along his. There’d been rings on all of them—once. I could feel the indents of extensive use still present in his skin. Now, he had two on one hand and three on his other.

“Look,” he said.

He held out a hand, and as the shadows rose from the ground, I saw that heat chased the shadows from deep within the earth—the power of the earth god, but given to him by the goddess. His tattoos glimmered beneath his dark gray hair. He raised the shadows higher.

“Lie down.”

I did so, and he drew the shadows over me, shaping them with his hands.

“I will watch over you.” His voice sounded distant. Sounds arrived too late, others too soon, but I understood.

“Do not fight it,” he said. “Let it pour out. Do not be afraid to let it touch me. My mind is my own.”

Except for Tonn and Malgog patrolling the base of the mount we were on, there was no one nearby.

“Lo, she comes,” he said, and then he hummed, his eyes lowered.

Sure enough, the goddess’s first rays cut the deep blue of the evening sky. She would move toward us over the next hours. In the later hours, she’d stay close, caught in the earth god’s embrace, but then she’d leave. To stay would mean the world's end.

I was nervous, though.

“Close your eyes. I’ll watch over you.”

The shadow shell grew darker, and I could only see the whites of his eyes, the glint of his teeth. Darkness came before the goddess. Her rays, like banners, fluttered overhead.

“Is this my Isilayne?” I asked.

He smiled at me. My mother had taught me of the great academy where all Mornae men face their trials.

“It can be. Do not be afraid to die.”

That was also of my people, a central belief. Only those willing to give all succeeded in the end. Only they could reach the peaks of power. The timid, the unwilling, those who clung to their lives... they faded or fled. Not like my mother’s exile—a political exile. In the other case, the goddess herself would hound you out, and the earth god helped. For the favored, whether Alcar, Mornae, or Baikal, there was no standing still, no plateau upon which to rest. Resting meant sliding down away from a power which had become as common as breathing to the Mornae.

“Let it out,” he said through the thick shell.

I had to let it escape my grasp, my control, to let myself understand the full extent of it, and even allow the goddess to expand me further for greater capacity.

And if it killed me, so be it.

He needed me to understand. If I was to be his consort, I must know myself. This was what it meant to be an adult member of the Mornae. Until then, I’d been living on borrowed power.

So, I closed my eyes and let myself go.

Memories bubbled up. Every face, every feeling, every sensation I’d recorded.

Tears streamed down my face. *So much* I’d kept bottled up inside. But I was learning nothing new. I just felt hollow, floating on a vast emptiness.

The power was insignificant, as my mother had said.

He let the protective shield fall, and the noise of the world flooded me.

“Nothing,” I said.

He held my face. “It was just the first time. There is much dross.” He was right. “Next time,” he said.

“When will that be?”

“Fennir is going west on a hunt. I will go with.”

I sat up, frowning.

“Don’t worry.” He stroked my face as if imbuing a piece of *kithaun*.

I took his hand and held it tight. I wanted him as a teacher. My knowledge of the world was still small. It comforted me to think he’d teach me so much more.

I dreamed of naming him my consort.

The summer of my thirty-sixth year, Nevaun went with his master and a great train of Baikal on a hunt for Mahwir, the great boar of the western forests.

He never returned.

My bliss had lasted a meager year and a half.

Fennir's son, Rohn, returned to announce their deaths; his father, Fennir, had also perished.

The other thralls whispered around me, casting sidelong glances my way. I just stared up at the sky.

Cold.

I hoped for the goddess to act on my behalf. I prayed for blue fire to rain down and consume us all.

When I first heard of Nevaun's death, I remembered my father was dead. I must have buried that memory. He'd been dead since the day I was born. My mother had told me stories about him as if he were still alive, roaming the wilds, but he, too, had suffered a terrible fate. A mighty knight, born of Isilayne, he'd died to assassins from a rival house. That was why she'd hid among the Yatani. I'd been born under the shadow of a dead father and consort, who'd perished just as I'd swelled my mother's belly.

For the first time, I faced the truth of what my mother had experienced. The pain a Mornae priestess suffered at the loss of her consort. Not that my mother would have shown it to the outside world. Her dignity had been too great. But I knew of it. Her suffering had touched me in the shuddering darkness of her womb.

I closed myself off, fighting the bitterness that threatened to overtake me, learning the lesson that every priestess should learn. A consort could be like the prairie flowers—here today and gone tomorrow, carried off by the winds. A priestess could know his sweetness if she didn't cling too hard to him.

I'd felt that sweetness with Nevaun. Though he wasn't my consort, he might have been. Yes, he *should* have been. I should have named him thus. What would the Baikal have known of it? I wouldn't have soured him. Our binding would have been strong and true, a pleasure to the goddess.

I did not let myself weep for Nevaun, though.

Fennir's son, Rohn, spoke at the next moot, draped in the heavy furs of his clan and with black ash on his face for mourning. "My noble father perished, chasing Mahwir himself. But alas, what is a man against a god?"

There was agreement, but also swathes of doubt. Rigir snickered. He distrusted Fennir, despite agreeing with him on important matters.

Rohn continued, his arms raised. "I built a fire even the stars could see!"

"And the daemon, Rohn?" Rigir asked. "Where is he?"

Rohn would not look my way. "Dead. Burned with his master."

Nevaun's ashes were now dancing among the stars. His essence returned to the goddess.

“Next spring, I will take my father’s bones to the sacred place,” Rohn said.

Baikal nodded their approval. Rohn had done what a son should.

“And Mahwir?” Rigir asked. “Did he escape you? Did he eat Fennir’s globes?”

They howled with laughter, and even Trosgan chuckled. Yorl frowned.

Someone near me whispered, “Skewered through,” and others added, “Torn apart.”

I sighed, trying to remember Nevaun as I’d last seen him.

Rohn turned purple with rage as the murmuring intensified. “I burned them. Both of them! Globes and all.”

I recalled my mother’s pyre, the way the smoke had danced across her remains. Every priestess and matron must learn this lesson to not allow loss to crush you, but to look forward.

Lead! House above all!

“What will the Black Bear do now?” Trosgan asked.

“Things cannot be as they were, Chief,” Rohn said.

Trosgan nodded.

“Those who disagree have left the stead. I now speak for the Black Bear.” Rohn paused, trying to gauge the mood of the gathering. “I am for Yorl,” he said. “We are the Wolf.”

The crowd muttered. It wasn’t the first time the Black Bear had offered false allegiance.

My master didn’t even twitch. If they wanted to get a reaction out of her, they’d fail. My suffering kept me from knowing hers. I assumed she suffered not just because of the lost pledges, but because Fennir had given her pleasure.

That night in the hut, I sat eating with Dormu. My master was outside with her companions, discussing the loss of so many

warriors. Rohn hadn't mentioned at the moot that they'd lost others in the near-mythic battle he'd recounted, and the dead had been her supporters. It must have been an internal war between the Black Bear.

My master entered and stood a moment by the hearth.

"A good lover," she said, regarding Fennir. "Strange but clever."

The Baikal spoke well of the dead. To speak ill could invite retribution from spirits or gods.

"The gods loved him," Dormu said.

"I'll miss him on the hunt," my master added.

And with that last word, my master left us at the hearth.

She said no more about it, and never mentioned my loss.

After losing Nevaun, I focused on my master's needs, though she seemed more distant than usual. I could let sorrow dominate me, though something in me refused. Besides my mother, he was the only other Mornae I had known. Our time together had been more than I felt a right to. I had dared to hope that there could be a life for me here among my captors. For the briefest time, a blink in the lifespan of my people, I'd known happiness.

As the weeks passed, I decided that I'd made a critical mistake. My survival depended not on getting comfortable and making a life for myself, but on keeping my master pleased and aiding her ascension to power. The bone runes had bound my fate to hers, and not for my benefit. How could I content myself with Nevaun before our fate played out?

Guilt plagued me that so far, I'd been nothing but a curse to my master. My little power was a curse. Nevaun had been a boon to his master, crafting artifacts of power and teaching him. And yet, despite my apparent uselessness, I felt even more bound to that fate. I had spoken the oracle, though at the time I hadn't believed it held any power. I'd been young, still unwise in the ways of power. Gods had witnessed it. Nothing could undo it.

I was a thrall, only that. And my master was not a friend or family.

I returned to my duties, and the memory of Nevaun sustained me. Time became a swollen river for me. I didn't know which way it went. The days piled on each other in endless repetition.

Perhaps if I'd been more vigilant, I could have seen what was coming.

My master seemed fine with letting the distance between us grow. She, too, seemed defeated, beaten down, though her striving for power never ceased. Despite living in the same stead of huts, we diverged. She'd grown weary of my goddess, and of her own. Power seemed to lie with Barka, and she offered herself to his service.

One day, when I passed a brazier, I tossed the lock of Nevaun's silver hair on the hot embers.

There was no point in clinging to him.

Matrons are shaped in a crucible of trials. They usually die. If they live, the stars shine for them alone.

— MATRON HESAE IN *WISDOM OF THE MATRONS*,
COMPILED BY JEVAN LOR'VAKAYNE, SON OF SAVRA.

The fire sputtered and crackled, breaking the silence that settled on the gathering. They looked at me for an explanation. Like them, my mother's story confused me.

My mother's words came out hard and unadorned, as if more words would unleash too much grief. Even after all this time, wounds remained.

She'd never told the story this way before, and the telling made me uncomfortable. I could see in the listener's faces that we'd all expected the usual story of battles and hunts and... well, such vain things. This telling, instead, had revealed too much. The heroes in the legends sat upon pedestals not made for regular folk. She showed us the writhing, bloody innards of what her life had been like.

*“You can tell a different story, Matron Mother,” I whispered to her.
“Parice can tell us of her time in the West?”*

My mother shook her head.

I sat back at her side, looking into the discomfited faces.

*I dreaded what was to come, but her power already seized me.
She must tell her story—if only for me. I, especially, had to hear it.*

*She straightened, resetting herself. She had no intention of
holding back. The story we’d hear would be more than anything else
we could have imagined. More than I may want to know.*

Feathered charms and wooden tokens swayed above me from the rafters, their gentle chime a raucous noise crashing in my ears.

My head reeled from the sleeping draft Chana had given me. She'd learned to brew it from the witch-woman of her tribe. The sour drink gave me dreamless nights to keep me from remembering Nevaun. Desire for him remained, though.

The walls of the chamber twisted, and my gaze blurred. I couldn't decide whether it was better to endure this nauseous delirium, or the dreams that haunted me.

A year had passed since Nevaun's death on the hunt, and not a day passed that I didn't remember him. A storm of feelings would burst within me, seizing me and reminding me of him. There was no potion for that. I must endure it. Noreh told me it would pass with time; it only grew stronger. I'd joined the ranks of the living dead—those whose suffering was too great for them to continue living. Yet, I must. The oracle I'd uttered pushed me forward. There could be no life for me outside of the fate I'd spoken as a girl. Thinking of Nevaun, and losing myself in the memories and feelings, felt dangerous... a risk to my safety, an unnecessary distraction in a

place that needed perpetual vigilance. I focused on serving my master, though I'd lost value in her eyes, or so it felt to me.

I wrenched myself from the comfort of my cot and stood at the hearth, refusing food and drink. We waited for a Baikal raiding party to return. I rubbed my eyes and hoped the mental fog would pass before my master returned.

The need for thralls to harvest wild grains, forage, and tend the animals, drove the Baikal to capture even more. The Yellows knew places beyond the Moon Sea to plunder, and where their larger cousins would be a surprise. Sometimes, they would leave for months at a time. This time, they'd raided for seven months, the longest stretch yet. The day before, a scout had announced the raiding party's approach.

My master's limber movement and better-looking thralls stood out from the line of returning Baikal, each covered in thick hides and furs. She trudged up from the south side of the village, seven thralls behind her. All were still in their prime. My master now tolerated children being born and raised in her stead, but she didn't bring any back from raids. It was the sad fact that most children died during their raids, or in the aftermath.

She passed me and dropped the rope at my feet. The thralls' eyes lit up. They whimpered and shrieked. I quieted them with a muddle of words in different tongues. "There, there," I said. "The gods favor you in being this giant's thrall."

They called me *dalis*, daemon, and words I didn't know, hissing and whispering incantations and prayers. When the other handlers started beating their thralls, they inched closer to me, the gray-skinned daemon.

"Troublemakers won't be beaten," I said. "They'll be sold. You do not want to be sold."

Chana and Noreh nodded at this.

It always helped me with my work that the other giants yanked at their thralls' ropes, a sad lesson they must learn quickly. My master had disappeared into her hut, but the other raiders howled and stamped their enormous feet, terrifying their new thralls. Their bone-numbing cries no longer affected those of us who'd lived long years among the Baikal. I'd grown hard to the impression the Baikal made on the new thralls and closed my heart to their suffering. I was the steward of my master's rise to power, and nothing would keep me from it, so I told myself.

I inspected and spoke to each thrall to discover if they were intelligent or had unique skills. My master had an expert eye. One or two slaves were worthy of her household. Unlike other Baikal who kept thralls like cattle, my master kept only those of outstanding quality. Her huts produced ironworks, pottery, woven goods, baskets of reeds, and jewelry.

Two of her thralls had injuries, despite our best efforts. My master had patience, but even she broke things from time to time. I'd had a rope made with padded binds that kept them bound without damaging the thralls too much. It had been a minor victory for me then, that she'd accepted my opinion, but I knew it was not for my benefit. Undamaged thralls meant more wealth for her.

I fingered the token of a thrall my master had taken a disliking to. She hadn't said it, but I knew it, and so I'd take care of it.

"Dormu, I'll review them now."

She frowned at me.

"All of them."

She grumbled.

One by one, I inspected the new arrivals and selected the ones to keep with a secret signal. We washed, dressed, and made them

appear more valuable. I told them how best to survive among the Baikal—how to please them, how to be useful, and how to avoid their rage. It was a hopeless effort.

Weakness to the climate, the blackrock, illness, or the lethal blow of a Baikal would eliminate the majority. My master didn't trouble herself over the ones she kept. If a thrall displeased her, she sold it. Let it be another's problem. If they perished, she didn't notice.

Thralls sometimes became too attached to me. My words to them were too strong... too sweet. I could still remember Hendar's kindness to me and the pain it had caused me later. Hope was a hindrance now. The world did not have room for hope or any good thing. If such good things appeared, they were like wildflowers—here today and gone tomorrow.

I separated the tokens as I walked, my little power running like a bludgeon through them. I no longer had patience for the slow search. They'd not emptied themselves of their old lives, clinging to their customs and homelands. These thralls often tried to run, spoke back, or dared raise a hand. At the end of the review, I handed Dormu the tokens of the thralls to sell. Her fist closed on them. She knew who best to trade with.

I handed Tonn a single token. It was for a smith who'd come to us from the northwest. I'd thought the thrall was Yatani at first, but he spoke a different tongue.

On the day Dormu took the rejected thralls to market, I stood at the edge of my clan's hearth yard and watched the thralls fade into the distance. I did all these things for my master. I tried not to absorb their feelings into myself. Instead, I tried to harden myself, to become more like my master. Despite our differences, I learned from her.

For the first time in thirty years, I forgot what I was. Did it matter anymore that I was Mornae? Did any of the accumulated feelings

and sensations mean anything? My master had a purpose, a direction. She pursued it often, to the detriment or destruction of anything and anyone else. She calculated each move. When she struck, it was with overwhelming intention.

I took her as my model. I wasn't as skilled, and carried too much of a burden. Nevaun's absence left me a husk: purposeless except for the ability to survive well. The senior thralls respected me. I was the thin barrier protecting them from the Baikal. I tried to do as Hendar had done with me, discovering and nurturing their innate powers.

When something undesirable happened, I'd let Tonn or Malgog know. They took care of the problem, and I never asked how. I just wanted to erase the turmoil in my mind. There could be no trouble now. My master's reputation must remain unsullied. Tempers ran hot among the Baikal. Of late, every moot was an occasion for dispute and even bloodshed.

I learned aloofness and ease with command. I did not ask or plead. I issued orders and expected obedience. Veikal and thrall alike knew what our master would do if they disobeyed. I never reminded them of my place of privilege. I wasn't always certain what that place was, but it was there. It existed. Unspoken, invisible, but as strong as the fate which bound us.

All that mattered was living to the next day—not suffering. Those thralls that clung to me like children, I sold. My master never asked the reason for the sales, either. They were a ring of silver or a load of ingots or cords of wood to her. So long as someone paid her, she took no offense. I often undertook the work of repayment myself to ensure there was no disturbance to her mood.

Baikal and Veikal paid to have me read the bones for them. In this, I also served, shaping her future by shaping theirs.

Even though she proved masterful in arranging her place among the Baikal, things were changing. More distant tribes settled in the flatlands. Thralls poured in. Like beasts of burden, sacks of grain, bolts of cloth, or tarps of hide, or, in one case, a length of rope, the Veikal and Baikal traded and exchanged them as they moved north. There seemed to be a fear, a panic, boiling up from the far south. They spoke of how Veikal were breaking away, running south, making tribes of their own. There were stories of thrall rebellions.

My master had a new thrall hut built. I didn't think she cared to have so many, but they were a sign of wealth and power. She needed to impress these new Baikal. Gathering support was the most important thing to her now. My master prospered far and beyond so many other Baikal. Even beyond Yorl. In fact, she'd left him far behind her. However, I sensed she was not pleased. The shaman of the hill may have spoken of her fate to sit the rise, but she worked hard to ensure it happened.

With each passing day, I wondered *if* it would happen. The god-word held less and less importance. The shamans of the hill and others retreated, and their influence weakened.

I was unsure that my word carried any weight.

Our world was at the breaking point.

A year later, I learned the power I wielded, and how much my mood had shaped the household. A thrall was hanging by her wrists from a beam of the work hut. Her feet dragged on the dirt floor. Summer flies buzzed about her head.

“We knew you wouldn’t like it,” Noreh said.

“Not after the last uprising,” said another. Since the *rokag* had arrived and the chief had smashed the loudest voices of dissent from the Blacks, there’d been nothing but rebellions. And for the first time, they happened among their Veikal. Their numbers were in the hundreds by now, and they galled their lieges. With poisons, often a scratch was enough, and sometimes there was more harm than that. Secret knowledge brought from the South turned on the Baikal. Trosgan and his minions—my master, included—crushed dissent without mercy. Terror reigned.

The thralls looked upon me with keen loyalty, adulation. Though I’d become hard, I’d never abandoned my promise to them. They had everything they needed, and they well understood my expectations.

“How do you know she plotted against the master?” I asked.

“We caught her telling another about the master, Dalis. She was a spy. She said none would believe us. Yillik was a jailer in Ahzhal. He knows how to make people talk, but she wouldn’t. So we wanted to use Ola’s power.”

A torturer for a thrall. I’d never even noticed the tinge of cruelty that limned his feelings, but now I saw them. I gave him a hard look, and he turned away.

“Ola can do it.” They motioned her forward.

I tilted my head. Ola was a woman from one of the Dragon Bay cities. A mysterious one who they all spoke of in hushed tones. My skin prickled as she approached.

“Your power works on the dead?” I asked.

She nodded.

“How long has this thrall been dead?” I preferred not to use their names anymore. I knew enough about them to distinguish them from each other. Except for Chana and Noreh, and the older thralls, I just didn’t want the burden of them anymore. I built walls inside myself, and I hid from my gifts.

“Since this morning,” Chana said.

The blood hadn’t dried yet, and it ran in thick globs from where they’d cut her.

“Do it,” I commanded Ola.

Ola was neither young nor old. She was small, like most southerners, angled and boney, skinny. Her face was smooth, with a tiny and almost lipless mouth, her eyes small and amber. Her hair was a dull, matted mess of brown against bronzed skin. There was just one thing that set her apart. At the roots of that dull mass on her head and throughout it grew the most brilliant yellow strands of hair—like gold. Like my hair bore goddess-light, hers bore Sayin’s; a remnant of the ancient empire, Saylassa the Golden.

She wore gauntlets she'd made that looked like claws made of cut and polished bone. Symbols adorned them.

"I need smoke," Ola said.

"I took this from a shaman of Melka," said one man. He produced a jar of the incense pellets the shaman used for their rituals.

"Goddess above," I whispered, "they could kill you for this." And I'd have to give the order.

They nodded.

"It had to be done," Chana said. Noreh nodded. "We'll not have any rebellion here."

"The rebels will know that we know now," I said. They hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Should I start?" Ola asked.

I nodded. What use was it in getting mad at them now? They'd done what they'd thought best, and Ola's power roused my curiosity. I unloosed my power and sent it into her.

We gave her room, and the men made a heavy smoke about her, so much so that we couldn't see her or the corpse except for the hands tied at the beam.

Ola chanted in her tongue. I didn't know her words, but I didn't need to. She was difficult to read, and I enjoyed the challenge.

I'd become ruthless. I picked apart her feelings like threads, and then interpreted their meaning. Ola came from a terrifying place indeed, but her people were honest about it. Their god was clear in his demands where mine was elusive.

The corpse's finger moved.

The smoke cleared long enough for me to see it. Jaws yammered. Lips smacked. The eyelids opened, revealing cloudy eyes. But nothing remained of that life.

Ola touched it with her bone gauntlet, and the corpse moved like a puppet, popping and twitching like something had woken it. Ola spoke for the woman. "I told the one called Wimmer, a Veikal. He promised to take me as his mate. I told him about the master going up the hills. I told him about the daemon."

"What about the daemon?" I asked.

The more Ola interrogated the corpse, the more I remembered about the dead thrall. The dead woman had been my master's thrall for ten years, keeping to herself on the edge of our gatherings and listening to us women speak. I'd considered our gatherings in the slave yard to be like household moots, but she'd profited from our secrets.

The facts spilled out of the corpse through Ola's mouth.

That I took southern elixirs because sorrow plagued me. Nevaun had made blacksteel globes for Fennir. Dark magic. Mornae sorcery. How my master wore black metal spikes. I painted the iron spikes with a glossy resin, making them easier to clean. From a distance, they must look like a special steel.

At the end, Ola hunched over. Her bone claws fell away from the body. I marveled at the power she had, but also at what it had taken to carry it out. Mastery of her god-gift must have claimed hundreds of lives. She was a daemon, too.

"Next time," I said, "bring any troublemakers to me." I gazed down on them, eyes narrowed. I stood a head taller than even the tallest of them. "Though, I expect there will never be an occasion to use Ola's gift again. Is that understood?" I wanted to add a threat of my own. Every day that passed, I felt a massive power building up in me, daring me to unleash it. It was just my feelings all bottled up, but I liked to think there was more to it than that.

They all nodded.

“Have there been others?” I thought back to the various deaths in recent years, from fevers, tainted meat, and illnesses of all kinds.

“One or two,” Chana said.

“It’s been three,” Noreh confessed.

“We took care of things for you. Even Thuka knew.”

“It was her idea,” said one man. “She just wanted to protect our master. And you, Dalis.”

I sighed. I still grieved Thuka’s death from fever. The memory of her opened the wound again. I’d never suspected her capable of such actions. It was moments like these that I questioned my little power.

“It is getting bad down in the Flats,” Chana said. “Hundreds and hundreds living squashed up in that swampy earth. Every day, some new violence.”

“Yes, I know.”

Trosgan’s plan had gotten out of hand, but in his mind, he was succeeding. He’d an army of the tallest, strongest Baikal there’d been in years, all equipped with southern steels. The shaman cowed to him, blessing this army and filling their globes with power when needed. Yorl led them, and he alone could destroy a village single-handedly.

And like a beacon of terror, there was my master, the Daughter of Aelath. The divine wind, they called her. I chose never to see her in battle and waited in the huts for her return, ready to scrub off the layers of destruction.

After what had happened with Fennir, and the Reds before that, only my master’s first pledges remained. But they felt pressure to change over to Yorl. My master’s territory had shrunk, despite her prowess in battle being as great as Yorl’s.

Everything seemed to race to where both our fates pointed.

At thirty, the twins could sit the rise. It was the earliest age the shaman would allow. As for the Mornae priestesses and knights, adulthood was when one's destiny could begin, and that was fast approaching for the twins. The time of preparation neared its end.

The next two years brought nothing but sorrow. For me, anyway. My master shut herself off from me, becoming like a hard stone. We each must have determined the same thing in our own way. We'd been playing their game for too long—that of the shamans and the chiefs, falling into the traps they'd laid for us.

If they wanted force from her, they'd get it. My master became the terror they wanted, and I must have also. Only Chana and Noreh dared speak to me.

Like the southern thralls I'd known, I saw my master as a tool to inflict pain and suffering on my enemies. The list was long and always growing. I'd become resentful of the ugliness that had accumulated in me. Their roars and bellows, their carelessness, their brutality, I wanted it all gone, and my master could be the instrument of my hatred.

Sometimes, I'd sit for hours—pressing my hands to the spikes protruding from her armor, running my fingers along the glyphs written into the globes, rubbing the straps and buckles. I'd drive the goddess power into it all, my intention like a red-hot knife. I didn't care who she killed. All of it had become abhorrent to me. I imagined

those fists and that powerful body pummeling, kicking, and destroying. Rage didn't frighten me anymore.

Nevaun would have been ashamed to see how I let these feelings run wild in me. For the first time, I didn't control it.

One day, word came of another rebellion in the Flats. This time, the rumor was that the rebels were Baikal. I walked at the head of a train of thralls who jogged to keep up with my longer strides. We entered my master's new hut, which was for her alone. Her Veikal shared the old house which faced the chief's yard; she no longer trusted any of them near her.

Months earlier, Dormu had become bitter—more than she had been since I'd first met her—and pledged herself to a Yellow Tooth. Then he'd rebelled in a disagreement over the use of a stream, and it had been my master who'd destroyed his household. I'd helped clean her kit when she returned. Goddess above, the horror of it must have been terrible. I was glad none of that suffering entered me, but I felt little for Dormu by this time. She should have chosen loyalty. Few of those of us from the early years remained.

My master stood in the center of her hut, head upturned and bathing in the light. Braziers burned and filled the hut with shamans' smoke. Shamans had marked her body. The hut was full of trophies: claws, pelts, and furs, the braids of Baikal beards with silver rings still in them, and chains of bone all rattled in the smokey breeze.

There was trouble amongst what remained of the Reds, and if there was any tribe that irked her more than any other, it was the Reds. She'd yet to take out her rage on the rebellious Blacks. Rohn, Fennir's son, had ensconced himself in Yorl's household.

"The steel," she said.

The men helped me tie it all onto her. Plates of spikes on her fists, jagged horns jutting out from boiled leather strapped to her

forearms. Wherever there was a part of her that could strike her opponent, we strapped armor. The thralls' hands trembled, sweat showing on their faces, but somehow, we managed. Then came the globes, too many to count. We'd woven them into belts. And then chains of bones, claws, and all the rest as adornment.

She'd burned Mari's silk years ago. I'd woven a fragment into the cord that bore my token. The silk and the token were old and faded now.

I strapped on her daggers about her person—just as she liked. With each tightening of a buckle or strap, I pressed my intention into the material like I was a sorcerer. *It doesn't work that way*, my mother's voice echoed in me. Nevaun's smirk goaded me. All I had was my need for her to win.

Tonn and Malgog carried her weapons. Massive things, the heavier the better. In the hands of Veikal, they'd have been impossible to move with sufficient speed, but in the hands of the Baikal, they moved as fast as a lighter weapon. Tonn had dropped her hammer once and crushed his toes. He still hobbled from that injury.

Once done, she looked at herself in a mirror of beaten copper.

"Helm."

The men brought out a helm which was a leather bowl lined with beaten iron, crested with horns and the manes of mountain lions—the northern kind with their speckled black and white fur. With it on, she reached the legendary height. She had to crouch to leave the hut.

Tonn and Malgog went with her, though they'd not fight on the frontline with her. No one did. When the twins fought—for Yorl was the same—everyone gave them room. Once they unleashed their fury, anyone caught in it would suffer.

Trosgan relished this.

Yet Trosgan waged no wars against the golden spears or hidden cities. Not even against my people, who still occupied the place of preeminence in all the North, the goddess throne of Vaidolin. Instead, violence fell on the heads of Baikal. He crushed and remade them as he willed. He renamed them and reformed them, breaking ties of kin and blood. Gems, gold, silver, iron, steel, and thralls spread through the tribes from his hands.

I couldn't help but think that he'd won at last.

The day came when the peace between us strained.

My master was on a raid, quelling another uprising. Gone for a week. The elders went with her, along with their sons.

It happened more that rumors started when the Baikal were away. Whispers and murmurs, like wildfire, burned their way through the steads and camps. Thralls would grumble to me, but I said nothing. During these times of perceived freedom, they whispered we should all break away.

Even the Veikal.

I made no sign of supporting them, and only ensured that my master's household remained loyal. I was not like any of them, and I'd seen too many uprisings crushed, with the thralls hunted down like rabbits.

What would I do, given the chance?

I squashed these thoughts. I was an exile, like my mother and Nevaun. Things were not good, but they were also not bad. My master often went hunting in the Horn for weeks at a time, disappearing and leaving me to manage her household. What she did there, I didn't ask. The woman Ola had interrogated had only

guessed. I didn't care enough to find out. I feared her, truly. I'd become a ghost to others and myself.

And so, I bobbed along my life like a leaf caught in a river current.

Most child thralls never lived to see twenty, squashed by their masters for whatever reason. I had reached my thirty-seventh year. I was still a youth, according to the Mornae, but I felt much older. Even adult thralls didn't live long. The terror of their masters, and the fear of their strength and size, often led thralls to make mistakes.

My good fortune was running out; my tricks were catching up to me. The talk, the looks, were dark. Sinister.

The way they looked at me made me suspect their fear of me had escalated. To these southerners, I was a curse incarnate. They believed I bewitched them with my words. They whispered about me that I was a living poison, my words like darts. There were too many thralls for me to know, too many I had never met. Still, my mind tried. If only I could soothe them and make peace.

But they walked away from me when I approached.

One night, in our hut, when I was sitting by the hearth, I asked, "Chana, what are they saying?"

She lit the fire without a word to me. Noreh shuffled about, her face in a constant frown.

"Noreh?"

"Nothing to worry about, Dalis," Chana said, shoving Noreh aside. "Get some rest. We'll finish the work."

I insisted, "Tell me." I never relied on them for gossip, for the mood of the village, but of late, I felt exhausted by the number of them all.

Noreh plopped down on the furs, her eyes red and weepy. "It's Fennir's son. He says things about Fennir's daemon. That he showed his father powers in dreams. That he intended to make him

chief. And now he says that you give power to the daughter of Aelath... that she is your puppet.”

This didn't surprise me. Fennir had trusted Nevaun, as my master did me. And I knew the globes he'd made were of a different craft. Mornae sorcerers could dominate a weak mind through their enchantments, and now there were Baikar who thought I did the same with my master.

Chana brought me the potion to drink, and the two women put me to bed.

I fell into a half-sleep, overwhelmed by so many feelings and yet still trying to make sense of them all. I felt it my duty to know every person in the village. If Fennir's son was spreading this lie, it was almost certain that others were, too.

Noreh and Chana wept in their beds. Their terror was genuine, and I had to prepare myself. I must speak to my master first. What could I say, though? Dare I speak words to her as I did with the thralls? Could I once again soothe her rage as I had when she'd been a babe?

I tossed and turned until my head ached from so much thinking. I'd reached the end of my wits, my cleverness, and even my power.

On the eighth day of the raid, as I was standing watch over the thralls working outside the main hut, my master came at me like Barona herself. She pushed aside thrall and Veikal alike, determined. It didn't matter how the rumor had reached her so soon.

Our eyes met, locked together, and the flow of blood in her arms, the twitch and flex of muscle, told me what was coming. I braced myself for the blow, and a shadow rose unbidden to shield me. She

struck it with the back of her hand, which was glowing white with Aelath's power—looking worse than it felt—and I flew across the clearing and landed against the log wall of the thrall's hut. I slid down it like time had stopped.

She stomped toward me, the ground shaking so that tiny pebbles and clods of mud danced on the surface of it.

Goddess above, was this to be my end? I settled into that realization as her spiked form moved toward me. Blood covered her, as always. Her globes were spent. The battle had been arduous. She was tired, but not tired enough to kill me.

Something ignited in me—a defiance. In the pit of my stomach, where I hid my mother's secret pride, I had the desire to fight back. Shadows swirled beneath me, contained for so long. My mother's echo deceived me, though. She had known how to fight, and she'd fought in battles. I was nothing but a pretty relic, traded and gifted for favors.

My master's eyes told me all I needed to know. She must show them all who was the master. I agreed with her. I didn't lash out. I shoved my ancient pride deep down.

A crowd gathered now, coming from nearby steads to watch. Her own thralls and her Veikal watched in shock.

She stood over me. Her feet pressed me against the hut. She waited to see if I would fight. Her face was hard, as if I were her enemy. Her eyes twitched, holding back more feelings. The world was breaking us, cracking us apart. This was what the chief had wanted all along.

Don't do it, her eyes seemed to say, almost begging. *Stay still. Accept.*

How ashamed my mother would have been as I rolled over, ignoring the pain racing through me, and offering my obedience,

palms out and up, as if she were a goddess to me. She grunted and stepped away, leaving me hunched over on all fours—groveling.

Chana and Noreh helped me to my bed.

Despite the protection the goddess had given me, I couldn't move without an ache or complaint for months.

After that, no one said a thing about where my master's power came from. Anyone who would dare risk the wrath of the Dark Goddess was beyond their gossip. Fennir's son shut his mouth. My master was like the wind, and not even the Baikal could make sense of her. None wanted to feel her wrath.

She said nothing to me about that day. She didn't need to. I understood her. After days of bedrest, I concluded it was all for the best. She could have killed me.

A swelling shame took over.

Matrons do not bow.

Matrons do not serve anyone but the goddess.

That was what my mother had taught me.

My heart twisted inside me. Reason had to win out. We were close to fulfilling the oracle; the time was nearing when she and Yorl could sit the chieftain's rise. She wanted no whispers about being my puppet or relying on secret magic. Her power must be supreme, even if it meant breaking me.

One day, after my master passed one of their trials in a great hunt on the Horn's ice floes, I found gifts on my cot: fine gray wool and southern silks, and a new thrall token like the one Nevaun had worn. The silver medallion was thick, worth a dozen thralls at least, and it had a crude engraving of the Dark Goddess enveloped in the symbol of Aelath. It hung from a silver chain dotted with blue-black sapphires.

I assumed my master wore its mate.

The wool and silk were for new garments. Chana and Noreh hummed their tribal songs, happy my master and I were at peace. They measured me and chatted about what garments they should make for me.

“Dalis is so lovely,” Noreh cooed.

They removed my garments, murmuring as they draped the new cloth about me.

“Like the statues of Ithka,” Chana said. “Za’al’thum, even. Dalis is much taller though.” They let my hair loose, setting it to cascade about my shoulders and patting it like it was precious.

They talked about me like I wasn’t there, praising my limbs, my breasts, the shape of my face and hips. I said nothing. It pleased them to dress me. They hated dressing our master in blood-hardened armor. Blood was her color, they’d say, whether fresh or dried black. This was a more pleasing experience.

They didn’t know my people—true Mornae—wore the lightest of garments, like wisps of cloth about them, hiding little. But they draped me in layers of wool and silk, the more the better. What mattered was the amount of cloth, a sign of my master’s wealth.

They were whispering.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Dalis is like a steel blade,” Chana said. “Lovely, but hard. Dangerous.”

They both grinned, proud of me.

If I was beautiful, it was a harsh beauty. I felt ugly inside. The feelings I’d taken in had scrubbed away much of me.

“A blade is for killing.” My mother often said a close approximation of a common Mornae saying: *A spear is for killing*. A Mornae warrior’s sole purpose was to kill. Among the Mornae, spear

and knight were interchangeable, so bound was their *zaeress* to their *kithaun* spears.

The women agreed. What did they want of me? They expected me to be like my people: a terror. My master did as well. She'd said my goddess should wait her turn.

How much longer?

They held up the large mirror. My form warped in the beaten copper, but it was clear enough. They were right. I was lovely. I held up my chin, eyes narrowed and with my lips pressed together.

I was terrifying, too.

Something was coming, and my master would put me on display. This time, for herself.

In the time since the *rokag* had come, Chief Trosgan had built up the gathering yard at the border of Zelaugr territory. His stone slab had become a proper throne, and the Baikal camps and steads flowed out all around it. The ancient rise still stood, of course, its legendary and mystical qualities being the key to his claim. Rothmin had once declared that bit of rock to have been the seat of Barka and Aelath when the world began. It must have been a footstool because according to legend, they'd been as tall as mountains.

The chief should have held the twins' thirtieth-year celebration in his yard with just the elders of their tribe to witness it, but the chief had other ideas.

That day, the gathering yard was boisterous, joyful for Baikal, who were loud and unruly as always. Thralls scurried about, filling cups and distributing slabs of charred meat. They dodged giant fists, arms, and legs. I kept watch over those of my master's household.

Below the rise, at a fire lit big and bright, sat Yorl, celebrated by his mates and even his rivals—especially by his rivals.

The twins had both turned thirty, but Yorl had all the attention. My master had prepared for this day, spent and given herself... but even

her allies seemed taken with Yorl. My master seethed in her seat. Her tankard resting on her thigh was still full.

And why should they not seek Yorl's favor?

He was the perfect Baikal to sit the rise. A hulk of young muscle, fourteen feet tall, with a mane of pure black hair and steel-blue eyes. He was even handsome for a Baikal. He'd earned sufficient blue globes to prove his prowess by this time. His father had ensured it. Rigir no longer doled them out with ceremony and ritual. They seemed to pour from Trosgan's coffers, like the lifeless gems from the south. The shamans filled them, but they didn't seem to glow with the same fervor as when I'd been young.

The old chief sat happy, very drunk, and surrounded by the other elders, tottering like him, who lifted their tankards with shaking arms to the younger Baikal. These old ones relished the younger men's strength, seeing themselves in them and craving the chance to be like them again.

My master offered them none of that nostalgia. They could never see themselves in her. As divine and fated as she was to them, they sought to control her for their own purposes.

Her anger became my own. I, too, was a thing for them to control. I'd been a gift to secure Yorl's acceptance as the heir. My master's place in the chief's plan seemed to matter little, if at all. Even if she sat the rise, Yorl would be the one to rule.

A roar erupted around Yorl. The Baikal loved feats of strength, and especially those that did not depend on god-power—because few had it. Yorl bested them at their games, and they loved him for it. They wanted a leader, and none could match Yorl in brawn. He turned their arms to the ground, crushed any rock they handed him, and bent iron with his fingers.

He laughed with them and stood stretching up to his full height, and he invited the others to challenge him.

One drew a tight circle with a knife, and Sorn of the Blue Tusk rose to the challenge. Sorn was only ten feet, but as wide as Yorl. They locked hands, chest to chest. Yorl seemed to smother him.

Whoever touched the circle's outer edge first would be the loser. The circle was so tight, they could not put a foot back to lean into the other. Yorl filled the space with his bulk.

I'd seen fingers snapped and wrists cracked like this—such was the force a Baikal could generate, even against one of their own. Northern Baikal were like iron, and Yorl was determined to show the fact off. A crush of Baikal pressed against the chief's guards to get a better look. Veikal and thralls watched from rooftops.

Yorl's body swelled, writhed, and twitched as he brought his tremendous strength to bear. I caught him glancing at my master, a slight smirk on his thin lips. There was no way she could stand in that circle with him.

Sorn was no slouch, but he was at a disadvantage. Once Yorl was leaning over him, Sorn's hands becoming white from the strain and his arms shaking to the shoulders, he tried to step out.

Yorl held him, teeth bared and eyes narrowed. Bones popped. Sorn pushed away, shaking his hands. Yorl threw back his head and howled. He smashed a fist into his open hand.

"Who's next?" His eyes gleamed, his tongue dangling like a wolf's. Yorl's supporters laughed, reveling in his victory as if it were their own. He pounded his chest and walked along the line of guards, searching for a challenger. They backed away from the line. The next one to challenge him would meet the rage he'd roused from beating Sorn. They were wise not to step into the circle.

Sorn had made an honest effort, but he received no respect. The spectators jeered him, shoving him out of their company even though none of them were brave enough to accept the challenge.

When none stepped up to challenge him, Yorl held up his massive arms to the cheers of his companions and rivals alike. Though they'd once said aloud that the twins should sit the rise, they now cheered Yorl on as if he would be the only one named chief. Excitement, strengthened by copious alcohol, even had Fain and Womtha cheering.

Not all cheered, though. To one side of the gathering, Baikal I'd not seen before glared at Yorl. They were a mix of Blues, Blacks, and Reds. Not all wanted to lose their self-determination to the Zelaugr. Trosgan thought he'd squashed all internal opposition, but it always sprouted again. As in my people, there'd been hatreds burning long among the Baikal. I even noticed Rohn, Fennir's son, moving amongst them.

A chant started in Yorl's group and spread through the fires. All except my master's, though I sensed there were those at her fire wanting to join in, too. It was hard not to cheer for Yorl, but it was *what* they chanted that made my master sit up straight, setting her tankard aside.

My gift charged out, rampaging through their bodies so taken with emotion.

"O'heskan! O'heskan!" Feet or fists stomped the ground. *Olin heskan*. The vigil. *Olin heskan deru*. The vigil of death. *Olin heskan Barka*. The vigil of the god.

One of Trosgan's women was yelling in his ear, waking him from a stupor. His eyes opened wide. They helped him to his feet.

"What? What?" he cried out. He raised his hands for the chanting to stop.

Yorl scanned the crowd, pleasure on his face.

“Stop that chanting!” the chief bellowed, but his voice was no longer so powerful, only giving more credence to the rumors he was declining.

I leaned over to Farya, Timoth’s mate, and whispered to her, hoping my master would not hear me as I asked, “What does it mean?”

“Yorl will be chief if he completes the vigil.” A shiver ran through me. “And our master, too,” she added.

“The chief will go to the tombs,” Timoth said. “He’s no shaman.”

My master’s fists trembled in her lap.

“Yes, Great Chief,” said a booming voice from the dissident side of the yard. A mass of giants moved toward the rise, and they were not shy about making their tribes known. “Let him go! Let him face fate head-on!”

“Talkun, it is not for you to decide.”

Talkun was a Black Bear, and he’d refused my master’s bed. Twice. “Is this not a gathering of all tribes?” he asked.

The chief grumbled. “I know where your loyalties lie.”

Yorl raised his hammer, and Talkun reached for his axe in a veiled insult to Yorl’s toughness. Talkun’s band was a dark, brooding bunch, grim as Fennir’s men had been. A Baikal didn’t do well when their clans or tribes weakened, but these giants didn’t look weak. Scarred and battle-hardened, each one.

Talkun laughed. “What do you all say? Should mighty Yorl perform the vigil? Should he be our leader?”

The cheers of the crowd drowned the last words out, but his chest constricted with hatred. He grinned, nodding to the cheering crowd. He waved away his axe and raised his fist to support Yorl.

The shamans consulted in a huddle. Thirty years old was far too soon. Forty, or even fifty, would be a more respectful age. My body ached from jumping from body to body. I could never hold so many feelings and thoughts at once.

I moved to Talkun, but he was difficult to read. His rage never dimmed; it had become calcified in him. Yorl set his hammer down, proud of himself. My gut tightened.

“He’ll go alone,” Farya whispered. “It is far. Much danger.”

I sifted through Talkun’s companions. They meant to ambush Yorl.

My master stood. Anyone else might have shrunk, crushed by so much disappointment, but not her.

“I, too, will go vigil,” she said. Light crackled around her, amplified her voice above theirs.

The yard grew silent until Yorl chuckled, hooking his thumbs in his belt. “Daughters of Aelath have no need of vigil, sister. Your daemon must have taught you that.”

She tensed, and I stepped back, but Farya was there, blocking my way.

“You should not go alone,” my master said, glancing at Talkun.

Yorl sneered. The crowd laughed, venom-laced.

She’d not intended to insult him, but that was how they took it. She raised her voice again, calling for attention, and I was there behind her, my intention that they should listen to her.

“There are dangers. I should go,” she insisted.

Yorl couldn’t take someone not intended for the rise. She was the only choice. He glared at me. “Your daemon does not know our ways, sister.”

The chief stood, tottering on aging legs. “Daughter, the gods have already touched you. You have no need of the vigil.”

He waved a gnarled hand for emphasis. He'd thought he'd managed her for good by setting her on the warpath. He huffed. That was all that remained of his mighty voice. His supporters looked away with embarrassment. Yorl could not sit the rise soon enough, in their minds.

My master's body tensed, tight as a drum. Whatever she said next, more cheers for Yorl drowned it out.

But I heard it like an echo in her spine. *"They'll kill him."* It wouldn't have sat well with Yorl or any of his supporters to hear that, even if it was the truth. She shook her head. The words hadn't come out as she'd wanted. She didn't have a clever tongue.

The chief, bleary-eyed from so much drink, looked about for someone from the hill. Rigir approached, muttering something under his breath, his gaze darting to my master and searching for me.

"What say you, Great Chief?" Yorl asked, still puffing himself out more. "Shall I go to the dead and hear their wisdom? Is it time?"

The chief was not all that sure about it, but the drink had him in its grip. He thought he'd be able to overcome those traditions and rule until he rolled off the rise, dead and gray.

Rigir whispered to Trosgan, and he nodded.

It was an auspicious time. There were pressures on the chief. His aging body, his scraggly beard, and his clouding eyes were not good signs. Baikal followed only the strong. They could not endure more uprisings. Someone strong must lead.

"Let it be as you say, my son," Trosgan said. "You will be the Son of Barka, Chief of Chiefs." His voice trailed off and he batted away one of his women.

Of course, he'd forgotten my master. Rigir hissed at him and tried to correct the wording, but the chief just drank and held out his mug

for more. He waved Rigir away. This night, he would revel in his son's youth and strength, and reminisce over all that was in his past.

It was the way of old men.

My master's only hope was that they would forget this talk by morning.

“Master,” I whispered, so as not to startle her. I repeated the address, daring even to touch her shoulder. A horn sounded.

She stirred and frowned to see me there. She peered through the roof vents. It was not dawn yet.

“Master, your brother Yorl is departing for the vigil.”

She surged out of the bed, clad only in a sleeveless tunic. I scrambled out of her path, her footfalls rumbling through my backside. She grabbed her hammer along the way, lifting it one-handed to her shoulder.

I gathered myself and ran outside with my heart in my throat, terrified of what might happen next. I felt our fate escaping from us. For a flash, I saw myself as Yorl’s thrall.

I could not let that happen.

They mounted Yorl on one of the Baikal’s horses, a beast as giant as them. I could almost walk beneath it without hunching down. They rode these beasts on special occasions such as this one. These horses were not altogether tame, and the grasses to the south soured their bellies. They ran wild in the upper valleys. Yorl’s allies, once his rivals, helped him with his pack, encouraging him.

The Chief stepped out of his house and stood on his porch, covered in a blanket. His Veikal women stood around him, doting on him. They'd go with him to the tombs when his time came to care for him in his last days and prepare him for the final crossing. They were too old now to bear children, and were thus bound to his fate.

My master marched to him. Her shift whipped about her thick, powerful thighs, pulling and tugging in the early morning breeze. The hammer still sat across her shoulder, and her hand shifted from its grip. I knew that movement.

She set a foot on the stoop and loomed over her father. So old, he was now. His women clung to him as my master was speaking to him. The veins and sinews of her neck bulged. Spent and small, he must have foreseen this day when his mighty daughter would rage at him. Trembling hands rose to pacify her, but only so high.

By now, all had woken in the village and were cheering Yorl as his great mount stepped out, each hoof-fall sending a tremor through the clearing.

The shamans of the hill, four of them, stood clustered together, wrapped in their sacred shawls, their blue light globes pale in the dawn light. If they gave their blessing, there was nothing my master could do. And they gave it, both hands raised toward Yorl as he passed.

Rigir looked at me, our eyes meeting. He didn't look pleased. He thought I had failed somehow.

My master stood there in the middle of the clearing as others walked with Yorl, already celebrating the new chief that would be theirs come autumn.

Those of the hill walked in a cluster, passing my master with no word or sign of acknowledgement. They entered the rise-hut and lit the taper. It would mark the time allotted for Yorl's vigil. If it died out

before his return, then Rigir would declare the twins dead to the rise. They were one flesh. Raurim had declared it, and Rigir concurred. All the gods had witnessed it.

Rigir stepped out, a thin stream of white smoke rising from the roof of the hall. "On the day when the brother moons sit the sky together, on that day, we will have a new chief."

My master's shoulders tightened, her back to them and her hand gripping and releasing the haft of her hammer.

If he came back, blessed by the gods, to such acclamation... where did that leave her? She would sit the rise because her fate ordained it, but it would be as a lesser voice, forced into a role Yorl chose for her.

She stormed toward her hut, her shift flapping in the rising wind, and I bowed my head as she passed.

"Get ready. We're going on a hunt," she said from within.

Chana and Noreh rushed to prepare a bag for me. This was the first time *I'd* been on a hunt with my master.

I ran out of the village in only a long tunic and the thin-soled shoes Chana had made me. My master walked far ahead of me, unconcerned with my progress. We passed through dense woods, following a game trail. With her there, spear at her shoulder and axe at her hip, I had nothing to fear from a wandering bear or mountain lion.

We reached rugged, gray stone hills. She was a speck up ahead of me, and I fought against exhaustion. Such was the surety of my obedience that she never looked back once. I trudged toward her as she waited on a promontory. My mouth gaped. Ahead of her, roaring, was the sea—the great sea. Not a lake, not a canyon river, but the greatest expanse of water I'd ever seen. I understood then why Barka was a god.

My gaze shifted, and I saw the thousands upon thousands of strands of power all bound up in the waters, the movement, the wind, the sky, and even the earth. It was frightening and complex, more than I dared understand.

Hendar had taught me something of it, but warned me about pursuing more until I was old enough. I'd awakened early to power, and early was never a good thing with a Mornae. He'd smiled and

chuckled. *Yours are people of the cycles*, he'd said. Mornae power required thousands of years to master. My mother and Nevaun had said similar things.

My master moved on toward the sheer cliffs. Enormous waves crashed against them, and I remembered hearing them from Hendar's huts. Or that had been another sea. This one sounded greater still. Water sprayed up high in the air, and I fell with a yelp, scrambling for safety. My master turned and frowned at me. Another massive spray shot up and drenched us, but she was unmoved.

I stood, trembling, and nodded to her that I was well.

This was a *dalisin*—a meeting place of the gods or spirits. So many powers gathered in this place. All that was missing was the Dark Goddess. Her power lurked behind the others, though, and she would not dawn for three days more.

We continued walking along those slick rocks, covered in mosses and crawling with strange creatures. The sea's anger did not diminish, but increased—like the Baikal, his children. In other places, it would still, but here, winds came from north, south, and east to fight over the vast waters. Clouds gathered. A strong wind blew me over. I scrambled over the rocks, guiding myself along a row of jagged peaks.

My clothing hung heavy with water, my wool bag weighing me down like a heavy stone.

Ahead, my master stood by a cave's mouth.

She entered, and I looked inside. She rubbed her fingers against dry wood and sparked a fire to life on kindling. I'd never seen her do that before. The entrance was wet, but toward the back, it was dry and warm. It was a cave of blackrock—not the purest, but thick veins of it crisscrossed the hollowed-out chamber.

The fire sputtered and crackled as she dropped smaller branches upon it.

With the light came an awareness that this was a special place to her, a secret place. There were hides and stores and stacked kindling. Marks adorned the walls.

A shaman sometimes lived like this, apart and near the gods, in natural places... places alive with god-power.

The Baikal had all lived like this once, until they'd learned to fell trees and make huts. Their size and numbers had driven them down from the higher places to the forests, and then closer to the plains. The Fall of Saylassa helped that descent.

Hendar had told me a story of how, long ago—a thousand years ago—they had even lived by climbing down cliffs and gathering the creatures that made their homes along the seawall. That was the last time they'd been true Sons of the Sea.

He'd said that, in places, the sea would draw back for a time and reveal treasures. The bravest Baikal would descend, walking far into the uncovered seabed, and gather them up. Their god and father devoured those who failed. There was a story of how waves carried one such hero back to the top of the cliff. In his hands, he bore the gems of the sea: pearls, black as night and others like pure snow. And even silver ones.

I took off my garments and laid them out to dry. Deep down in the bag, I found a dry tunic. My master stripped out of her hides, leathers, and furs, unconcerned about her nakedness.

This was her place, where she could be as she pleased.

I dared to ask, "Master, what is this place?"

I knew her to be a talker when she was with the men in her bed, or with those she trusted. Fain and Womtha and others had her confidence. But with me, she'd never said much. Just looks and

gestures. They always said a world of thought to me, but now I wanted her own words.

She squinted at me and shook her head. Her feelings flooded me, crashing into me like the waves outside. She spread out a hide and poured out dried foods—meats, nuts, and berries mashed in fat. Hunter's food.

“You know.”

I nodded and ate. It was true. I sat with her feelings and constructed a story of my own about the place and what she might do here. I'd never been to a shaman's secret place. They all lived in the sacred places, but would often wander off to other lonely places and commune with gods and spirits. That was where they felt the gods' powers more fiercely. But they could not live there all the time.

I considered how my master intended to live here if Yorl became chief. To declare herself of the cliffs, of the seas and winds, and become a shaman, forsaking the rise altogether. My eyes widened at the prospect. She shook her head and stuffed a massive wad of dried meat into her mouth.

She said nothing else to me, but tossed me furs to sleep on.

The fire dimmed, but I could not rest. The place throbbed, *kith* calling to me.

She slept untroubled.

When the deep night came, I saw why she had come to this place.

The night was still. The sea lolled back and forth, as gentle as I'd seen it yet. Not a cloud sat in the sky—only stars. The winds had even gone silent, as if waiting for something. The gods were waiting for her.

She stood out at the edge, naked, without even a weapon, her toes gripping the edge of the cliff.

Her black mane flowed down her back, black as the surrounding night.

She looked over her shoulder at me, and I stepped closer. My legs started trembling near the edge, but I crept along. I willed myself to stand straight.

For a moment, I thought she meant to throw me over, to make an offering of me to her god.

Calm, she turned back to the sea. It was as if everything in the world was waiting for her.

“Witness, Daemon of Vai,” she said. Her arms rose then, and my gaze shifted to the other world, watching the strands of power lurking behind all things. Those of the sea and air tingled and shimmered.

Winds roared, and I stepped back.

But she was watching me, looking over her shoulder with her lips in a snarl.

I nodded and stood again.

She turned back to her work.

Clouds gathered far out over the ocean, crackling with light. It raced toward her, and with it, the depths of the sea crashed hard against the rock.

Her body looked like sculpted steel; her hair whipped in the winds racing passed her. I saw it with both sets of eyes. She was a mortal, and yet a master of the other world. Why had she not said anything about this before? To the chief?

She was a shaman. Not of the hill—no, even greater, like her ancestors of old. Like those Hendar had spoken of.

Clouds gathered overhead, dark and roiling. They solidified above her hands. “Witness!” she roared over the sounds.

I watched, with both eyes, the wonder of a shaman of the sea. The fabric of the waters and air altered, releasing their power and gathering toward her. The skies cracked above, and lightning crept down like fingers, closer and closer. She roared again, releasing more of the threads, pushing herself. Like chiseled marble, every muscle taut and pronounced, she stood out against the gathering storm.

More power gathered above her. The clouds crackled, and the air grew pungent and smoky. I covered my mouth and coughed.

The lightning descended then and struck the stone, forming a cage around her. She screamed and roared, and I felt it all. *Pain. Exhilaration. Terror.* Smoke or mist lifted from her skin, and she seemed to glow like her blue globes. But she did not need vessels, for she *was* a vessel.

The lightning died down and her hands glowed, crackling with the power left behind.

“Witness!” she said again.

The sea was returning to its natural state.

“Witness,” she said, her arms raised to her sides.

I did the only thing I could in response. I called my goddess. My mouth opened, because that was how I had always done it, and I cried out a long, sorrowful howl... just as I had done when my mother had died.

Crack! Crack! A stone-splitting rumble. The earth responded. In that deep blackness of the night sky, I found Vai, mightiest of all. The call gathered to a powerful hum, just as it had when I’d been a girl with Hendar. With him, it had been a joyful time, and a joyful sharing of our gifts.

This was not a joy.

My calling pleased my master, and her body reverberated with power great enough to fill the light-globes and weapons of a host of Baikal.

She roared again at the sea, and I thought she would break open from the strain, that it would fill her to the very last hair and breath. She drew out all she could until her arms lowered, and she let out a deep, pained cry.

Witness. And I did. My body swelled with her pain, of body, mind, and soul. The throbbing call to my goddess buoyed me up and kept me from collapsing. My master’s shoulders sagged. She had done the unimaginable in this age of decline. She was daughter of the sky *and* the sea.

But it would not matter.

Such was her frustration. She’d been born out of her time. If she was to be like her ancestors, to achieve what they had, she would

have to be the first to recover the power of the past, even at the risk of her own life.

My mother had taught me that Savra, leader of the first Mornae, had never lived in the crater; she'd only seen it from a distance, with her people all dying about her, struggling to master the Dark. Those who couldn't tolerate the new power turned back to the power of Sayin, bright and warm. But they, too, died. One couldn't walk both paths. Sayin and Vai were jealous gods. Savra chose the Dark, and had stood on the edge of greatness, just as my master did that night.

And I was in awe of her.

There was nothing I wouldn't do to help her—both then and in the future. I alone knew her as she was. I alone was her witness, as someday she would be mine.

She stood there as the sea returned to normal. The clouds rushed off. My call died down. Blood gathered in my nose, thickening and pooling there. My flesh felt like it would melt off my bones. I sagged against the stones, expecting at any moment for one of us to die.

When the first wave sent a spray of water up to us, she turned.

As usual, she said nothing to me, but walked past me to the cave.

When I entered, she said, "Get ready."

We returned that very night, marching back for hours. She raced ahead, her long strides bearing her away. I was still in shock from what I'd seen on the cliffs and struggled to keep up with her. Rocks mashed my toes. Roots trapped my feet. I fell often, crashing onto my knees, cutting my arms on branches.

The blazing light still flashed when I closed my eyes. I couldn't explain what I'd seen. Her power seemed even greater than my mother's.

She was far ahead of me, almost running. Her body still shone with Barka's and Aelath's power. What did she intend?

I scrambled to my feet and covered my mouth with my hand, holding back a cry and tears.

She meant to take the rise by force. What else could she do with that power?

But it could not work. The twins must sit it together.

I ran hard to catch up to her.

Dawn was breaking over the village when I arrived. Chana and Noreh were waiting at the entrance to the stead. Tonn and Malgog stood outside my master's hut. Timoth, Fain, and Womtha stood to one side, yawning, and arrayed for battle.

I walked to our hut with Chana and Noreh hanging upon me. What could I say?

A ram's horn sounded. Three more blasts followed it.

"A moot," Chana said.

"Our master has called it," Noreh said.

"Has she asked for me?" I asked.

Chana shook her head.

My master had not allowed me to witness that display of power for nothing. She always had a plan, and I held my belly, the pit of my fear stirring.

"When will it be?" I asked. "I should wash up."

Noreh shook her head. "Now, Dalis. It is now."

"Priestess?" Chana asked.

I nodded. They ran ahead to prepare my costume.

Tonn and Malgog walked ahead of my master, bearing her weapons. They pushed through to Fain and Womtha and her other supporters. Together, they entered and claimed the left side of the hut, nearest the rise.

She stepped into the empty center, coming beneath the light of the open roof above. The dawn was slow that day, the light weak and pale. My mouth dropped open. She didn't look so fierce. Beneath this light, she seemed fragile. It was absurd, of course. There was nothing but strength in her. I'd seen it.

She strode about the gathering of elders, forcing them back from the center. She next unsheathed her dagger and drew a large circle before the rise, cutting the ground an inch from their toes. A murmuring wave rose and built in them. My power flew out of me, charging into them all.

I swayed, but a hand behind me held me steady. The chamber swam before my eyes. I shifted in and out of the shadows, but none noticed. All attention was on my master. The Baikal were in a state of confusion.

Trosgan rose, half-choking on his own slobber. The night's cold had dissipated with the heat of their great bodies, but the old chief

still shivered under a heavy fur. Thralls struggled to light braziers on either side of the rise as he raised a shaking fist at her. “Not in my hall! Not in my tribe!” His body twitched and twanged with every word, struggling to get them out in the usual way. His mind yammered. He’d not seen this coming. He’d never thought his daughter would issue a challenge to another Baikal. She had no need to. She had Yorl. The gods had promised her the rise if she and Yorl lived.

Yorl had gone, though, and if she lost... if she *lost*... He realized for the first time just how precious she was to all of them.

“You cannot!” he boomed. “You don’t yet sit the rise! It’s still mine!” He was grasping now, trying to see through to her plan. Even though the idea sat in his mind, the truth of her importance to the Baikal, it was his plan, his vision, which was more important to him now. It always had been. His face contorted.

“Then why does it matter, old man?” she asked. She stood in the center of the challenger circle. She’d worn the old harness, and had no protection except what her gods would provide. The power was there—no longer radiating over her white skin, but stored away like a river behind a dam.

Trosgan growled and snarled, not wanting to admit the weakness of his own plan.

“I stand here to defend our claim,” she said, staring at the floor. “You sent him off alone, bound to the vigil when enemies still prowl your yard. Did you think it would all be so easy? Does anyone here think you can defend the rise... old man?”

The Baikal looked at each other, expecting the chief to charge her, to put her in her place. He didn’t. He couldn’t.

The others stirred, narrow-eyed, calculating the odds that they might beat her. If any of them defeated my master, no... killed her,

even by accident, that would be the end of her claim, but also Yorl's. He could not sit the rise without her.

My master had raised a question he'd never considered since the twins' birth. Someone might challenge *her* and thus bring the twins down. Trosgan roiled about on his throne, soothed by his women.

"This can't be," the chief said. But the shamans were not backing him. He scanned the crowd, but did not linger too long on anyone. The rise-hut was full of challengers.

Rigir, eldest shaman of all those gathered, stepped closer and whispered in the chief's ear. The chief looked my way, his eyes sagging, watery and red from a long night of drinking. His countenance was that of a man far past his prime. He was a shameful chief now, his days numbered. Not even a shaman could he be.

His gaze hardened, lips tight. There was a weakness there. We both knew it. He muttered to himself, spittle dotting his beard.

They'd warned him I'd be a curse to anyone other than my master, but still he'd tried to use me.

Now was the time for my goddess to speak. I didn't want to do it though because I dreaded losing her. Even after what I had seen on the cliff, I doubted.

I took a step forward, gaze lowered, and raised my hands, palms out, to my shoulders. "Who can deny the daughter of Aelath?" I asked the assembly.

The chief spat at the challenge I'd just raised to him and all present.

A second, worse captivity would befall me if she lost. I thought then that my mother had been right after all. Better to have died at the mouth of that cave.

I lowered my hands and scoured the packed hall. It seemed like a hundred Baikal had crammed into a space intended for twenty. My master stood alone in the circle's pale light, waiting.

Of all those present, I counted six Baikal—huge, burly masses who thought themselves capable of being chief. But they'd not considered fighting her. They'd seen my master as a reward for defeating Yorl. She was the ultimate prize, even greater than the rise. Any child of hers was worth more than anything the chief could offer. They seemed unsure and stepped back. They were unwilling to give up my master's favor, or unwilling to lose their honor. A challenge need not be to the death, but it would require yielding before witnesses, which was something they could not risk—not to a woman, powerful though she was. They might strike their own women, but they'd never considered fighting a goddess. And if they won, others might challenge them until all that remained was a hill of dead Baikal.

Only Talkun stepped forward, the black-haired hulk. He'd urged Yorl to make the vigil. A sour grin broke the blackness of the thick beard trailing down from his face to his belly covering his chest like a rug. His thralls had braided it with rings of iron, and white clay symbols adorned his body. I knew the look; he'd come ready to fight. His muscles rippled and bulged, making even my master look small in comparison.

I feared for her, but only because she was my surety, my safety. I never deluded myself that she cared at all for me.

"Outside," my master said. "Let them all see."

The chief howled. She would heap shame on him and dash his hopes. He hadn't even considered what would happen if she were victorious.

Talkun walked out first. He didn't care who witnessed the fight.

The chief complained to his women. In his drink-addled mind, he'd already lost it all. The hall emptied into the already full yard. Smaller Veikal and thralls perched on roofs. It was a multitude, a collage of every tribe of Vailassa.

Womtha and Timoth made the circle. Talkun stood at the edge. I couldn't understand how there'd be any room for my master in that ring.

Rigir stood on the porch, also sour-faced. This was not how he'd wanted things to go. He rattled his staff, and so did the other shamans. "Witness! Let the gods decide!" His shoulders hunched as he leaned on his staff. I'd never seen him look so weary.

Talkun bore two great mallets, each the length of a Yatani man, with two blocks of pure iron at the ends. The weight of them caused his arms to swell.

My heart lodged in my throat. Tendrils of deep shadow that only I could see flapped about me and struggled against my will. Goddess above, I'd rain down blue fire on all of them. I'd been waiting for this my entire life—waiting to see her crushed.

My master fought with her two-handed hammer. Despite the blow Hendar had made against my mother's killer, he'd taken a risk. Baikal preferred blunt weapons, as cutting didn't always work against their hard skin. I'd seen honed blades simply glide off before.

They stepped into the ring, and Talkun stretched out his hammers, encompassing half the space. She held her hammer with its head upright, pressed to her chest. He snarled. There'd be no peace. He'd never accept her bed or rule; he'd have to kill her.

It had already begun, but neither wanted to start. The assembly watched in silence, for they'd not wanted to see her killed.

My mother had once told me how Mornae knights moved like the wind, but in shadow. I'd never thought to see something like that.

Until this day.

Talkun swung his mallets, wanting to crush her with a single strike. Memories of my mother rose unbidden in me. I saw her moving, elegant, and swift. That was how my master moved, but on this day, there was a pure rage powering it all. My power poured out of me, reaching out as far as it could and gathering every feeling, every movement, recording it all for a posterity I was not sure I'd have.

He swung hard, certain of his greatness. He moved fast, the power of his god flowing through him. But my master was not where he expected, and an unseen force, a massive hand of wind, buffeted him before he could strike again.

Gasps erupted in the crowd.

Talkun lay face-down in the dirt with a sprained left arm, a broken right wrist, and countless other wounds. Her foot and her weight thrust down upon him. She threatened to crush his massive melon of a head, but he spat out his surrender.

The Baikal looked on in unusual silence, neither cheering nor jeering. It had happened too fast for them. The ground looked as if a stampede of horses had galloped through. They blinked, unbelieving. There'd been a fight, but none had seen it.

I had, however. The beats of it echoed in my mind, in my body. I'd seen the way she'd shaped the power stored in her, having it burst out of her: a raging sea, a thundering storm. Nothing here could withstand it, nothing Talkun possessed.

The chief didn't know whether to cheer for her or yell at her.

Talkun crawled out of the ring, but none helped him. I snorted. Already, loyalties were shifting.

My master remained in the circle, waiting. Goddess above, it was like seeing my mother again. My gaze shifted and beheld the marvel

of power pulsing from her body.

No other challenger stepped forward.

And then, one by one, they growled, snorted, and cheered. It had dawned on them... it was all up to Yorl now. The chief looked on with tears streaming down from his eyes. He'd prepared himself for his lifelong scheme to fail, and so he wept like a babe because she had given it back to him stronger than before.

She'd defeated Yorl's chief rival. She'd secured the rise and shown them all her power.

If only it could have been so easy.

“Mother of Many,” an elder said. Those around him agreed.

They flinched as my master shifted toward them, but there was no room in the chief’s yard. Everywhere around me, massive legs moved and shifted, arms and hands swinging. A fist nudged my back, almost knocking me over. A scuffle followed, with massive bodies shoving and shuddering. My legs trembled from the effort to keep my footing. Another shove pressed me close to my master.

Without thinking, I grasped a strap of leather around her thigh. Her massive hand clenched tight, but then released.

“Mother of Many!” voices cried.

The chief squirmed. Had he thought about the same thing? Even as far back as the day when I’d first met my master in her crib? Support was building for the notion. My master must bear a child to every Baikal tribe and produce daughters like herself. It was the god-word, they all said.

My head grew light, my breath shallow. More massive bodies crowded in, and all I could see was the rise where the chief sat.

“I have seen it,” said a scraggly old shaman, his bone necklaces rattling. He’d pushed his way through and now stood before the chief and his shaman. He was more Veikal than Baikal—a sign of things to

come. Yellow ochre symbols, not the white chalk paint of the northern Baikal, covered his face.

They tried to pull him back, but he just raised his arms, rattling his charm stick at them and calling down the ancestors to witness. “In the Great Beyond! I have seen it!” He listed a series of names. Legendary names, fathers and mothers of tribes who’d been born and lived in the misty, ageless past. “They all said the same thing to me.” He paused, his hands raised to the crown of his head, protecting it from whatever evil may befall him. “Mother of Many!”

More shamans pushed their way forward like nothing I’d ever seen. One had tiny skulls arranged like a helmet, and another wore golden bones crowning his head.

They’d seen it in visions, in the Beyond, spoken by every ancestor going back until the very first. The sky, the sea, the hills, the forests, the beasts... every spirit had spoken it.

Mother of Many.

In their minds, a new Isal, the mother of all origins, the source, had been born to them. From her would come the future of every Baikal tribe, from the northern plains to the creeping jungles of the South.

The craving amongst all those Baikal for a woman of their own kind was great. They were already seeing themselves as her mate once she took the rise with Yorl. They imagined themselves to be the heads of a new dynasty. A daughter of Aelath could bear more daughters like herself and change the Baikal forever. Through her, the bloodlines could strengthen, and they dreamed of having fifteen-foot sons with whom to conquer Vailassa.

I sighed. I had spoken that fate. This was happening because of me.

Bodies pressed closer. I couldn't tell whether they were friend or foe. I could only hope they were my master's allies. Craning my neck up and around, I searched the faces. Womtha's white face was pink. His shoulders fanned out, creating a protective barrier behind us.

Where was Fain? Where were the rest of her allies?

I feared they would carry her away by force. That was something she'd never allow—it would be the death of her.

And me.

I must survive this day like every other day.

I tried and tried to assuage them all, to change their minds and have them see things my master's way, but there were so many, and so many new bodies. Exhaustion stripped me of what little focus I had.

Womtha huffed and grunted behind us.

I gripped the leather strap more tightly.

There was a twinkle in the chief's eye. He had an out. Yorl could sit as chief and my master could be mate of the tribal heads, bearing Zelaugr daughters throughout the tribes. That might be the way to peace between the twins and the way to save his own legacy.

"Her fate's known already," the chief said, shoving aside his doting women, regaining his dignity. If he didn't, the place would erupt. I closed my eyes for a moment to regain my strength.

Bones rattled. Rigir stepped forward, scouring the crowd. "Fate is a mystery, Great Chief," he said. He inched up to his full height, one of the last true Baikal shamans. He towered over these new shamans with their strange ways and garb. Yet, there were more of them. They were an omen in the flesh. He could not ignore it.

The chief smiled under his thick moustache. His chest bubbled with giddiness. He glanced my way, his eyes narrow slits.

They were trying to change the oracle, shaping it to their own agenda.

“Enough!” Trosgan bellowed, and then chuckled. “Fate is a mystery! Let the divines sort it out. To the hunt, all you laggards. Let us see what our southern brethren are capable of! Eh? Eh?”

The northern Baikal howled, and I pressed closer to my master and Womtha behind me, his massive white hand cradling my shoulder. I felt a heavy breath on my head. I looked up and met Fain’s concerned face.

My heart sank. Few had aligned with her even after her display. How long would Fain and Womtha stand with her?

As word spread, more of the Baikal elders murmured against the daughter of Aelath's fate to sit the rise of one tribe only, wondering whether it wasn't wiser for her to be mother to their heirs.

She dared them to try, which was brash. She denied all her bed, but they came begging for her company in the middle of the night. Those few she bothered to listen to, she took to her bed. And when their pleasure ended, I heard them swear their service to her. I would sit outside her hut and make a note of their genuine feeling and share it with her. Most lied.

In the chief's hall, the taper marking Yorl's vigil shortened. I think we both dreaded the day when a gentle breeze would waft the last bit of smoke away. What then?

Nevaun had told me once that the Baikal were a doomed people, unbalanced between sea and sky. Their women died in childbirth. They needed more women like my master, but they did little to help that.

And my master, the only woman of her kind among the Baikal tribes, seemed to have no interest in being their Mother of Many. Not until she had what she wanted first. She had her goal, and none would dissuade her of it. In this way, she was not unlike Mornae. A

divine urgency drove matrons to protect and lift their houses above others.

If she had the desire for a daughter of her own, someone like her, I did not sense it. Bedding these men was all a battle for her, all a movement toward her goal: the chieftain's rise.

My master stayed in her hut. A dreadful silence overtook her stead.

Talkun's defeat had done nothing but harden an idea which had been simmering in the Baikal for a time. From that day on, everything she did only seemed to confirm what the majority wanted.

The old chief just nodded and grinned.

At the feast of Melka's Twilight, in the last days of autumn, Yorl's taper neared its end. The Brothers sat in the night sky for two days, and soon they'd separate, with Lovan breaking away from Yalloc.

A wisp of gray smoke rose from the taper's burning end. The taper, a strip of beech bark covered in slow-burning resin, hung before a crude wood carving of all the gods. It spun, curled, and twisted as the end burned. It had been two feet long when Yorl departed. Now only a stub, a hand-span, remained.

Two shamans, each of a different god, kept watch over it. Shamans used the tapers to mark time, but like my goddess, time was fickle. Sometimes it burned too fast, and others it made no clear progress. But it never stopped burning. Shaman charms dangled from the cord binding the taper to a beam. With such charms, they invoked their gods' favor on Yorl—begged them, even. A *kith* stone, jagged and sharp, hung within Aelath's silver ring.

I turned away. Nothing seemed more pointless than hanging pebbles, feathers, vines, and bones before mute gods. I'd dressed myself in the priestess costume, like a charm, and stood out amid the grim faces.

The taper licked up an inch, and consumed hours of god-time. My stomach leapt with it. The gods were speaking. My mother and Nevaun would have smirked at the Baikal's primitive notions, as well as my subservience to them. The gods didn't listen to us.

The gods move and we live in their wake, a Yatani saying that my mother approved of.

My master could seize power now, taking what she wanted. We flowed downstream from what should be. It was my fault. My arrival must have diverted the flow of this people's history. Was my purpose to be a curse to them? I had no such intention.

A trembling breath shuddered through me. Goddess above, let my curse end. For once, let me be a boon to my master.

Tension rippled through the gathering. The important elders sat in the rise-hut, and the rest sat in the yard. The yard was as quiet as the inside of the hut. Thralls moved about, serving food, filling tankards. The chief sat Rothmin's ancient seat, glaring at the subdued revelers. A giant who looked like he'd shaved his head and beard with his hunting knife kicked a thrall and sent him sprawling. My ire roused, but the thrall's master made no complaint.

My master snuffled, drawing my attention back to her. She shoveled food into her mouth at a regular rhythm.

Despite my fears, I'd never considered that my master would not meet her fate. I tried not to think of the thralls, even the Veikal, whose circumstances would change for the worse. There was little hope for Yorl's return.

A rumble sounded in the yard, then loud shouts and booming voices. A crowd pushed through to the rise-hut's entrance. Talkun stepped through them. His brow was heavy, and his eyes harbored nothing but ill will. A bristling mass of black fur and beards, his clan followed close behind. Long handled daggers stuck out from their

belts. They shoved a Wolf elder and his clan out of the way. Thralls scattered, tripping, dropping food and spilling drink.

Trosgan flapped his hand, struggling with his woman and furs.

My master's concern was building. Tonn stood to her left, bearing her axe, and Malgog to her right, cradling her hammer. She'd gone to the cliffs again; a halo surrounded her when I looked at the threads of power. She tossed away the hunk of meat she'd been chewing on and wiped her hands on her hide breeches. Malgog shifted, his arms shaking from bearing her hammer. He'd few seasons left in him.

I dreaded the inevitable confrontation even though the Baikal seemed to thrive on it. My White Eye plied them to my master's cause. It felt desperate. The taper was so small, and every breeze caused the tiny flame to flare.

Talkun and his friends wolfed down the chief's food, talking in low voices and chuckling. I felt his stare and looked down at my hands, clasped in my lap.

When the hearth fire turned to blocks of deep red, Talkun rose.

"Chiefs!" He paused and called to them again. The taper wisped, and his eyes narrowed. When all turned their attention to him, he patted his chest. "Before the gods..." he offered a single nod to the carving bearing the faces of all the gods, "I will speak what no one wants to hear."

A low whine issued from Trosgan's mouth.

Talkun sneered and gave his back to the rise. "I have been to the tombs. I have spoken with the shamans who tend the fires along the vigil-path." He turned to the chief, but his eyes slanted toward my master. "None have seen your son, Trosgan."

The chief bumbled about in his seat on the rise, waking from a deep stupor.

“He is dead.”

All turned to the chief. Half-eaten shanks and tankards trembled in their fists. They’d come to feast, not fight.

Talkun turned to my master, raising his hands to the ceiling. “We need a new heir. Everyone here knows what the fate runes said.”

My master’s anger had never been so great, but she kept it pressed down hard, controlling herself. She gave off a kind of vibration, and I heard words in it—bloody thoughts and ideas.

Everyone turned to her, eyes wide and confused. They, too, seemed taken aback at the idea that the twins would not fulfil the oracle’s words.

The chief sat on the edge of his seat. Dull gray hairs draped across his beleaguered face. “Does the taper still burn?” He screeched the words.

Pathetic!

Rigir pushed through to the rise. “It does, Great Chief.”

“How many days?”

Rigir shrugged. “One. Three. Maybe more.”

The chief hid his face from the crowd with his hand. He muttered to himself. I searched through his swampy thoughts. He’d exhausted his cleverness. His bluster was less than a child’s.

Rigir knitted his hands over his head. “Only the chief may declare it burned.” He glanced at me for support, but I didn’t understand his purpose, and I was becoming bitter. My lips tightened, and he glared at me through narrowed eyes.

The chief lifted his head. “Then, it burns!”

The crowd settled, but hands were now grasping hammers and axes.

Talkun snarled. Denied like my master, he remained just as determined. Rage clouded his reason like the giant who’d killed my

mother. And, like my mother, he was vengeful, angry.

I didn't care which of them won, which of them was right. I just wanted my master to succeed, and me with her.

Most seemed pleased with the chief's decision to declare the taper burning still. They either wanted Yorl to be chief, or for the unrest to cease. Others craved my master. They leered at her. To bed her was to be with the wind goddess herself.

Something had changed, though. They were thinking of her differently. They no longer wanted to follow or adore, but to possess. And if they couldn't possess her, they wanted none other to possess her. Just like with my mother, they'd destroy a beautiful thing out of greed and jealousy. I thought of a day in their future when they'd realize their mistakes, and it pained me. Nothing but struggle would come from these feelings. If only they could choose differently now.

Despite my master's strength, someone might assassinate her. Until Yorl returned or the shamans declared him dead, she was in danger.

For the first time, I hoped Yorl *would* return.

The gathering continued in silence, Melka's time at an end.

Winter arrived, as gray and somber as the Baikal's mood. During these overcast months, the Mornae rested from their practice, but I found no relief from my little gift.

Over the following days, I took it upon myself to taste my master's food and drink. She seemed to agree with the intent, because she always let me drink first. Poison did not affect me, the Dark in me obliterating it before it could take hold. At most, I'd feel

discomfort. It was something my mother had done when sampling the waters for the Yatani.

Womtha fell ill. Thugs beat Fain about the head with sticks while he slept off a hangover.

The taper had ceased burning for a week, but the chief would not declare it burned. Bare trees creaked. A veil of clouds already covered the far north. I slept in snatches during the day to keep watch over my master at night. I preferred the night anyway, enjoying above all the coming and going of the consort moons and stars. In Winter, my goddess moved differently, eschewing the black crater. Still, she shone through a haze, and I dared ask her to help my master.

The chief sat in his hut, hiding away from the truth that was on everyone's lips.

His son was dead, or taken by dark powers.

My master suspected Talkun. Dour and bitter after losing to her, he'd only a handful of followers. A skilled warrior of ancient stock, he was the last significant dissenting voice. I'd never sorted out what had happened in Rothmin's time. The stories varied. Layers of falsehood shrouded the event.

The chief could not avoid the winter moot, though. Already, the clans and tribes were arriving. Even a chief must obey the ancient customs.

Ten days of somber celebrations.

Ten days of waiting for the inevitable.

On the last day of the winter moot, Talkun rose in the rise-hut amid grumbles and protests. "I will find Yorl. I will prove him dead."

Silence.

"And if he is alive... all the better! I will challenge him next. Maybe I'll have more luck with him." He winked at my master. He'd kitted

himself out for ritual with his best furs, polished metal, and buffed leather. He expected her to be his mate when he sat the rise.

The chief's supporters chuckled and urged him on. How they all clung to Yorl, their hope.

Talkun turned to me, puffed up, his hand gripping the pommel of his hunting knife.

"We've lived under a curse long enough." His nose twitched as I sought his mind, so I skirted the edges. I suspected he knew more than he'd say aloud. Later, when he'd won, he'd lay out the truth of Hendar's actions. How he'd slain Reds and Blacks alike to capture me, all to make amends and seed this curse within the Baikal. "Whatever harm has come to Yorl," he continued, "even now, he may be a captive, held by wicked daemons in the bowels of the stone city. I will set him free."

He meant to make himself a hero, winning over these folk by facing great evils in the name of saving Yorl. How easy it would be for him to kill Yorl and bring back the proof he so desired. Like Rohn with his father, Fennir. He'd make the greatest pyre the sky had seen and then bring back Yorl's hand as proof. That was what I pieced together from his raging feelings.

The Baikal grumbled at the talk of daemons. No matter how long I'd been among them doing no harm, they opposed my influence on *their* daughter of Aelath. Their thoughts were too ingrained for me to shape.

Talkun raised his hand. "Even now, I fear what this curse does within the stead. Did shadows not waylay Fain? And wasn't Womtha laid low by tainted waters? My man here has pains and sees ghosts. How much longer can we tolerate this ill-favored gift? We all know we can't trust the giver."

The chief cradled his tankard in his gnarled hands. He'd made peace with Hendar, but doubt crept back into his heart.

Talkun continued winning over the assembly. "We Black Boar, those who are still true to the gods, we still fight the crater and its legions."

He pulled open his hide tunic to reveal a gash, black and rotting, on his left breast.

"Is this what we want? The gold spears are not the danger. I will prove Yorl dead and then lead us in the right direction. Remove the curse!" He snorted and blustered, facing me, and showing the wound to all. He'd been on the verge of calling me a witch, of repeating the rumors about Fennir's thrall. The words sat balanced on the tip of his tongue, but he held back.

Everyone moved away from me, suspecting my master's imminent rage. I stood straight, despite the trembling of my limbs, chin up with the dignity of my people, like a silver spike gleaming with goddess-light.

Silence settled on all. Talkun stood there looming over us, his eyes filled with hatred.

Then, my master roared with laughter. Timoth brayed, and Fain and Womtha. Laughter spread out from her.

Rigir's eyes widened until he, too, snickered.

Womtha and Fain made light of their afflictions to all.

My master just shook her head. Talkun was trying to scare them all with old tales.

"I have the right!" Talkun bellowed. His voice cracked. With each laughing howl from White Womtha's pink lips, he grew more frustrated. "The taper has burned! The time has passed! We all have the right!" Rage rose within him, his face turning purple at the lips

and around his eyes. "I am Black Boar! I am a son of Yagath and Nawir, born of Barka and Aelath. Modrin was my brother!"

Modrin had been the one to oppose Rothmin. By brother, he meant their bloodlines joined in the past. Fennir and Hendar were also of Modrin, but Talkun didn't mention that. There was simmering in the other Blacks that the Wolf did not want discussed. I couldn't dig it out.

The chief's line may have sat the rise for three generations, but that was nothing to the Baikal. There were clans that still did not even accept the rise as anything but one man's idea.

Talkun's size and power inspired them. He'd lead them to victory. Younger Baikal had come to the moot that year. Talkun and my master had battled for their pledges. The Baikal continued to fracture, and I only made it worse.

My master stood then, her hand in front of me like a shield.

"I will find my brother. That is *my* right." Before anyone could protest, she added, "By the fate runes."

"The god-word, yes," Rigir said, confirming it for all. "It is only right that the daughter of Aelath should seek her other half. Let the winds unite!"

"Yes!" blurted the chief. What a useless fool he'd become. "The god-word." He clung to this last hope for his wretch of a son.

"I will find my brother, and when I return with him," she said, turning to the rise, "you will declare us Chief of Chiefs." She glanced at the clan leaders gathered for the moot. "Every chief present will do it."

Yorl's supporters all concurred. The chief bobbed his head and motioned for the shaman to make the pronouncement. How he longed for his son to return to him.

Talkun barked and grunted his rage. "Great Chief, Son of the Sea, also say that if she does not return with Yorl in the time allotted, that I will be chief of the Zelaugr."

Trosgan's mouth gaped, lips quivering. Rigir glared, but only leaned on his stick. His power, too, was waning.

My master grasped her hammer and held it across her hips. "If I am made chief, Talkun, you will bow to me not just as chief, but as a daughter of Aelath."

Those who held to the sky goddess nodded their agreement.

Talkun hesitated, but then he chuckled. It was more than he'd planned. "Fine, fine. I agree."

The chief's eyes watered. His end had come. The end of his plans. They'd all give in to what she demanded. So little hope remained. "Let it be so," he said.

My master's thoughts teemed with hatred and rage. Hatred for Yorl, but also for her father. For Talkun. For the Baikal, who did nothing but undermine her. She would drag Yorl back by his hair, vigil or not, offending the gods and spirits, just to have what she thought was hers.

Rigir spoke the words of the divine agreement and made the face. They looked my way next, and my master stepped aside.

I posed. Shadows bubbled and swelled at my feet. Baikal stirred, preparing to stampede out of the hall.

Rigir settled them down. "All gods must consent. Even the dark ones." He signaled for a southern shaman, whose god was a large antlered beast, to do the same. Every divine representative committed to the decision.

The chief gave the order that my master ride Eskar, stallion of the herd, to seek Yorl out.

We marched out of the moot to make ready. Most averted their eyes. Those hoping to be her mate ran after her. They didn't want her to go. Fain and Womtha followed, heads bowed. Timoth and Farya stood apart. It would go hard with them if she failed.

Never had a Baikal woman entered the vigil tombs—not voluntarily—and there was more. It had been a Mornae city, and there was an ancient, uneasy truce set upon it. The Baikal held the boundaries as sacred. The shamans recited the words of the accord every year at the high summer moot. A woman, especially a daughter of Aelath, should *not* enter the deep places. The goddess could possess her, make her a daemon, and send her back to devour her people. These were the stories they told.

But these tales could not dissuade my master. She left to gather her kit. I remained outside her hut with her supporters.

A deep horn broke the silence. In the distance, Eskar whinnied and stomped. They'd called him with the chief's horn. He glanced back at his mares at the edge of the wood, then he whinnied and charged toward the stead. The crowd pushed and shoved to make way for him, but he was quite good at doing it himself. His enormous rump swung back and forth to make space.

Fain and Womtha shielded me from the pressing crowd.

My master emerged from her hut and tossed a turnip to Eskar. He chomped it down and pawed the earth. She nuzzled his head and issued orders to her household, then she mounted the splendid beast, a veritable giant with legs like stone pillars. The beast was a horse with short legs, but thicker than any horse I'd ever seen. He seemed like a cross between a horse and an ox. Powerful enough to bear a giant, his steps thundered over the packed earth of the yard like a herd of reindeer.

My master reached down for me. I hadn't expected to go.

Chana shoved a pack into my hands. Noreh slung a satchel over my head. Their eyes filled with tears to see us go, and my heart ached for them as if I were leaving helpless children behind. Although they were now wrinkling, and silver hairs streaked their heads.

I stepped to my master's open hand, and she lifted me like I was a doll and set me in front of her. The beast was too broad for my legs, so I gathered myself up at his withers, legs crossed, and held the horn of the leather saddle as tightly as I could. My master's round shield covered her backside. Womtha and Fain secured her hammer, axe, and spear. Throughout her person were knives and daggers of all sizes—one the length of my leg, but only a short blade to her.

We moved out, pushing through the Baikal. They patted Eskar, but didn't touch the daughter of Aelath. She was on a sacred mission.

I looked back and gave a small wave to Chana and Noreh. Fain or Womtha—surely, Timoth—would care for them, for my people. I searched for them in the crowds, my heart breaking when I couldn't find them all. What evil would befall them because of what my master and I were about to do?

Unrest seethed behind us, but what lay ahead was more perilous.

The wilds were full of terrible beasts. I'd seen massive boars the size of shaggy oxen, and bears that lumbered through the forest, knocking down hundred-foot pines with the swag of their backsides. But there were even worse things according to the stories. Fell beasts of shadow or light, for Sayin could also produce terrors.

Nevaun had told me that this was a land of giants and powerful beings of all kinds, but it was not because of a sea god or an air god.

Vai was the only reason he'd given, and the black earth below her.

At that moment, as we left the village, all I had known for thirty years... we were on a path to meet that very power.

Rothmin's Stead nestled behind us in the hills, and the villages in their fires' smoky haze. We'd avoided the camps and come around by a hunter's trail, a long path cut through the waving yellow grasses of the Flats.

My master held out her hands on either side of me and bid me stand. I crept up to my full height on Eskar's withers and gripped her fists to hold myself up.

The land looked vast, bending and folding in little ripples of grassland. I'd not passed this way since the day Hendar had gifted me to the Zelaugr. The vast, open sky overwhelmed me, and I choked back a gasp.

Ahead of us, on the horizon, dark shapes jutted up from the ground. Ancient sites of standing stones dotted this part of Vailassa. Arranged like constellations or formed in the shape of symbols, only the gods could read them. One of these paths ended near the place most sacred to the Zelaugr, what they called the tombs. It lay within the Moon Sea, but the Mornae had made that city long ago, and called it something else.

"I see the stones," I said. It was the nearest site to the village, and her enemies expected her to take the most direct route. "I see

shapes. Weapons. They try to hide.”

“If I don’t follow the path, I may offend some god.”

I waved like a reed in the wind, standing so tall. “Not mine.”

My master snorted a laugh and lowered her hands. I descended to my place and got as comfortable as I could. We turned off the sacred path and headed south toward a grim, gray range of hills. We'd pay no homage at any of the standing stones along the path. We tempted fate and angered the gods, but my master had become a goddess unto herself. And she had me, daughter of the most fearsome goddess, to speak a god-word on her behalf.

As I soon learned, though, we couldn’t avoid all contact. The paths through these hills forced us through camps and villages. Word would get back to her enemies. I kept my thoughts to myself, trusting her.

At the first village, Baikal stood on their porches to watch us pass. We moved toward the clan chief’s hut, but she turned Eskar away. We passed through without stopping. At the next village she intended to do the same, but somehow word had gotten there first. They were expecting us. Gossip from Rothmin's Stead, her declaration at the feast, had already reached them. *Mother of Many they called out*, though they gave her ample space. They offered her the warmth of their huts, to celebrate her and give her everything they had. She was invaluable to them. My master just grunted and snorted the whole way.

It wasn’t all positive, though. There were those that blamed her for Yorl’s failure to return, or they supported Talkun. It was unclear. This was Black Tusk land. The Black Tusk were the only tribe of Blacks with rights to wear their charms and display their totems—they’d earned the right by helping Rothmin defeat the Bear and Boar and others. They didn’t have the strength of the other Blacks,

though. They were scrawny, like shaman, but lacking their power. Perhaps bred with lesser tribes, being so close to the Moon Sea. They'd gone unnoticed since Rothmin's time. Treachery pays back the traitor in time.

The bodies of thralls told me much about what was happening in these hills. Thrall corpses, rotting as the unfavored did, adorned pine posts stuck into the ground like evil totems. The living ones were gaunt, bruised, and pained. I read their signs, the twitches, the glances. These were ragged, weak people. Just the tinder needed to drive Baikal into a rage. I may have sold one of them off long ago.

I trembled with fear the whole time, but she said nothing. An occasional grunt was all I heard.

Hunger stalked the place—even among the Baikal and Veikal. So, we continued. In one stead, a pair of Veikal women ran up to us. My master pressed me back, her hand shielding me.

"Aela, favor us!" they said, jogging alongside us. "Hunt for us, Aelaku. Our men are dead. Dead to the Great Wolf. Please, Aela. Mercy."

Infirmity hung from yellow-skin and beamed from sickly eyes. They begged. Their mates must have fought for the Reds, or in a recent uprising. Now they were bereft of a tribe unless one took them in as thralls. Trosgan had made even that choice difficult. No tribe or clan seeking his favor would take them in. Why didn't he just kill them and get it over with?

Living as they did seemed a worse fate. He meant for them to suffer, and to remind these small villages of his victory over them.

My master urged Eskar on. Once we'd left, she said, "Nothing we can do."

"Yes, master," I replied. I preferred to help them. I searched her feelings for even the smallest sign that she concurred. There was

nothing there but determination to achieve her goal.

We passed through each village like ghosts, but it was the villages that were the true phantoms. Never had I understood how poorly things went outside of my master's village. We camped far away from them, though villagers tried to follow us, to proclaim their loyalty. None came close, and by morning, they'd gone.

My master hunted and kept us fed, but it was hard going.

"Scrawny," she said one night while dressing her kill. The doe looked like a rabbit in her hands. She scanned the wood. "Shol's herds have gone south. Those left behind will die this winter."

Nevaun had told me how the goddess affected every living thing north of the Moon Sea, even deer. Baikal preferred to hunt Shol's herd, the largest of the antlered beasts. In these parts, my master had to settle for the stunted deer. She'd hunt while I tended the fire and Eskar stood watch. She'd bellow in the distance. Birds would fly up over the tree line, desperate to flee. Despite growing up with the Baikal voice, it still chilled me, as it did her prey.

She'd eat a small deer on her own. She gave me pieces of the liver and kidneys and even heart—the best cuts, small ones which giants often overlooked. I'd never seen her cook before, though it was just charred meat. I accepted all she offered, even when I was full.

And so, we continued. We went the long way through the Black Tusk Hills, great black peaks looming in the distance.

I sat atop Eskar and glanced behind us. Someone had been following us for at least two days, since the last village. My master only trudged forward, dragging Eskar by his reins along the boggy ground of a narrow valley. We'd been rising into more rocky terrain. Spikes of *kith* jutted out from the earth, cracking its surface and forming crevices and long fissures. She avoided those.

Boredom set in. The terrain never changed.

I stirred from a reverie. We weren't on a trail, and from the sky, I could tell we moved in the opposite direction of the tombs.

"Where are we going?" Hendar would have frowned at me for speaking out of turn. Why did I remember him then? I felt like a child again. The weight of the past thirty years was behind us.

She didn't answer. She also didn't stop. Eskar huffed, unhappy with the difficult terrain.

Whoever was tracking us wasn't trying to hide. She must have known they would send someone after her not to kill her, but to hinder her progress. They didn't need to kill her, but it was the boldest move. My master would never be quiet, never be docile. They might beat her, though... break her. I shuddered at the thought.

I fell out of time again, fatigued and bored with the landscape, the sway of Eskar's gait like a rocking crib. When I woke up again, we were in another valley. A lonely red leafed bush was the only difference from the last one we'd traversed.

"What is this place?"

She looked back at me, brow knitted. She tugged on Eskar, who complained and stepped through foot-deep mud.

Our stalkers followed. Eskar was helpful, but slow, and they seemed to move faster than us on foot. A Baikal, even a tall Veikal, could travel as fast as a normal-sized horse could trot. They gave no sign of giving up.

They intended to kill her. Few Baikal saw past their rage. In that case, I also would need to die. They'd need to silence her god-word.

She pointed up toward the crumbling ridge ahead.

We walked a mile or so along the edge of a spill of mountain rock. At a bend around an outcropping, she stopped. She collected large stones, leaving me atop Eskar. I couldn't be of any help in the fight. She bound up the stones with cords and ropes across his broad back.

The shield, she strapped to Eskar's flank, and it acted like a wall on my left. Next, she tied her hammer to my right. It weighed as much as me. And then her two axes—a one-handed axe with a thin, fine head, and the other long and daunting with a beard, neither of which I could ever hope to wield. Eskar shifted under the strange weight. Stone clattered.

She pressed her sheathed paring knife to my chest. I took it and tucked it into my woolen belt.

Daggers strapped to her body and spear in hand, she took a final look back around the bend.

She leaned close to Eskar's ear and ordered him forward. She patted his rump, and he took hesitant steps, the stones and weapons clanking. I looked back, watching as she leapt up the cascade of boulders and crumbling stone like a giant mountain lioness.

I smiled as my admiration for her swelled. The drive and power throbbed in me. It faded as we moved away from each other, though, and my heart sank to my gut. A lonely, broken land gaped before me.

I was the bait.

As the day wore on and Sayin's rays lengthened, turning the sky pale white, thoughts of what could happen next plagued me. Eskar could bolt and abandon her to run all the way home. I would have to throw myself from his back, and then what? The ideas raced through my head... the possibilities... all of them dire. It seemed my courage, all the courage of my past, had been dumb luck, and even foolhardy. I just wanted her to return.

But the thoughts only assaulted me all the harder. I considered what freedom would mean. To go where I wanted. I could go to my homeland, and never reveal my mother's name. Someone would figure it out, though. Mornae had long memories, my mother had said. I sagged on Eskar's withers. It didn't matter that I didn't know my house name. That truth remained locked within me.

I could find a tribe like the Yatani and be their soothsayer. I had significant knowledge already, learned from so many peoples of Vailassa.

Eskar, unaware of my turmoil, plodded along, picking his way through the fallen rocks.

The sky glowed bright yellow as Sayin descended past the western edge of Vailassa. Wolves howled in the distance, and a deep forest loomed ahead. Eskar seemed less sure as their cries

filled the night. But, like my master, he was bull-headed. His footfalls softened as we entered the wood. If it was a game trail, we were both in trouble. Beds of ferns and writhing vines covered the forest floor. From atop Eskar, I peered through the trees, dozens deep. There seemed to be no end to the forest. Wind whistled through the bare wood. Shadows and light danced through the trunks.

Night came, and I covered myself with a blanket which I'd pulled out from under a tight cord binding the stones. Eskar protested with a low, snuffling grunt. I'd lost all sense of direction and trusted Eskar knew where he was going.

Mornae are not woodland creatures. We need the stars and moons, black peaks and deep earth. Here, the dense canopy of branches and pine blocked the sky. My eyes adjusted to the deep shadows. They became light where there was dark and dark in the scant light there was. If something came for us, I'd see it.

Eskar's ears twitched.

I tried to still myself, but my heart was thumping, and blood rushed through my ears.

Since my youth, I'd often imagined Baikal hurting me—smashing or beating me to a pulp. I shivered. It was not my imagination at all. I'd seen those things. Images flooded my mind, along with the feelings of those poor folk caught unawares or used as sport for an ale-sodden giant. Sensations and impressions threatened to overwhelm me. The trunks shifted, and I saw figures everywhere. Destruction would be a relief from the constant terror, and I'd recorded so much of it. The dread, the terror... the pain.

Eskar shifted as my body trembled.

Then he stopped. In that vast nothing of white and black lines, deeper now, I could see nothing but trees.

He stretched his head up and down, straining, as if he meant to whinny. I thumped my heels to his sides. He just pawed the ground with a massive hoof.

Again, I urged him on. I leaned close to his ear. In the deepest voice I could muster, I said, "Walk on."

Eskar's ear twitched in response, and he stepped forward, stopped, and then pawed the ground.

I looked over his head. A form stood far ahead—that of a bear or another enormous creature. My head lightened; my vision collapsed to a tunnel.

It moved. I covered my mouth and stifled a cry of joy. Shaking, relief washed over me.

My master ran up to us, her hands high to calm Eskar. He stomped his feet, the stones and weapons rattling.

"Easy," she said, pressing her face to his.

Our eyes met. She seemed surprised to see me. Had she thought that I'd run? I was so tired. I'd done nothing but fear the shadows.

She stroked Eskar, soothing him. She hauled off the stones and repositioned her weapons. I huddled at Eskar's withers to give her room. She mounted and took the lead.

Eskar snorted at the added weight, but he continued.

I settled back into her, not caring if I violated a rule. I abandoned the guidance I'd always given new thralls. Exhausted, I fell asleep in a heap, bobbing this way and that between her arms.

I woke at dawn. We'd left the forest and were crossing another cascade of stone. It flowed down and into a pale green sea. The

green shone like a mirror, except it waved and rustled. It was a sea of grass, broken up by rivers of gray stone.

I'd thought her filthy from her adventure with our stalkers, but as the sun rose, her hands and arms turned rusty. Black blood had seeped into her nail beds, and she'd damaged one, ripped off through the middle. It could have been her blood or another's. It was hard to tell because, by the morning, her injuries had healed.

"How many were there?" I asked, again forgetting myself.

"Five. Two mattered."

Three Veikal, no doubt crushed in an instant, and two Baikal. A significant war party to hunt one giant.

I sat up and pointed. "There's a pond there."

Sure enough, as the sun rose, small ponds sparkled through the rushes. The water had pooled on a ledge overlooking the grass sea.

"You can wash." Had we been in our village, she'd have gone to the bath.

She grunted and spun Eskar toward the sea. He snuffled and started down the stone slope toward the glinting water.

From a ridge, we looked out over the greatest thing I'd ever seen.
Vailesso.

The Great Moon Sea. The Green Sea, as the Baikal called it.

It was a strange place packed for miles and miles with tall, thick grass—like the shafts of a million spears, tall enough to reach my master's face. It was called a sea because inches—sometimes feet—of water covered the ground from which the stalks rose.

The winds from the east and west clashed over it, sending the giant stalks waving like the waters of the blue ocean.

We entered the Moon Sea at the base of the Black Tooth Hills. Marshes and ponds abounded, and the water was too deep for me. My master had me remain seated atop Eskar. He disliked the dark water and stared at it, expecting an unseen threat to spring out. For a while, the stalks reached above my head, but sometimes the ground rose, and Eskar and I rose above them, looking over the stalks to endless miles of silver-green swaying in the sun.

She turned then, like she'd realized her mistake. She reached for me, but hesitated. "Get down." With rope and leather cords found in packs hanging from Eskar's flanks, she made a harness like the ones Baikal used to carry goods for long travels on foot. She

strapped it about herself and cupped her hand at her side. I grabbed hold of the harness and put my foot in her right hand. She lifted me, and I climbed up to her shoulders.

“Don’t stand above me,” she said, and she directed me to slip my legs around her and rest them so that I could sit in the harness and not be weary.

Satisfied, we moved on like this. Deeper in, only Eskar’s raised nose and the crown of my master’s head broke through the sea. Baikal tribes lived on the east and west cliffs of the Moon Sea, but the middle was a vast, uninhabited country. There were stories of strange creatures here.

My master was most concerned with those that walked on two legs.

So, we began pushing through the stalks, sloshing through the thick soup of mud and slimy green stuff that served as the waters of the Moon Sea.

My master could walk an entire day without resting, but this was hard going. Her legs burned, but she pushed on, driven by a quiet rage. Boredom or exhaustion with doing nothing, but keeping myself propped on her back plagued me, a useless lump. My eyes and ears strained against the hypnotizing movement of the stalks, the crashing and slapping grating on my nerves. Sometimes, I just stared into the blue sky for a welcome break. Sleep often took me.

Even though my master's steps were softer than other Baikal, I was sure her passage could not go unnoticed by anything that might live in this strange sea. Sometimes, I grew dizzy from watching behind us, expecting her enemies to break out of the green waves. Mile after mile of pale green stalks closed like curtains in her wake.

She always walked with her spear in hand, a small axe at her side. The dagger sheathed at the small of her back poked and

prodded me with its antler handle, the knobs pressing against my own.

We only stopped to satisfy Eskar. She'd cut the thickest stalks for him and slice out the tender part, feeding it to him chunk by chunk. We also ate stalk, saving the hunter rations for an emergency. The syrupy insides satisfied me, but my master struggled. Not that she told me these things, I just knew them.

Stalks and stalks. They closed in on me. At night, at least I had the stars and moons.

Drool rolled down my chin. I woke and wiped myself.

Shadows.

I startled, a strangled yelp escaping my lips.

Shadows moved in the tall grass behind Eskar's swaying rump. I imagined the shadowed assassins of my mother's stories.

My master whirled about, spear ready, and I sloshed about in the harness, keeping my place at her back. Eskar pawed the watery bog, startled by my cry. The grass swayed before us in all directions. It was dusk, and both light and shadow played with my eyes, showing me faces and forms in the shifting walls of grass.

She waited as only a hunter could wait, body tensed and ready. Eskar's ears rotated, searching.

Time crept by.

She straightened, and I grabbed hold tight. She didn't mention my mistake, and I resolved not to be a nuisance. Eskar was the better sentinel.

I kept my gaze forward, peering over her shoulder.

When the goddess passed overhead, huge and filling the entire sky with her presence, my master covered her face. I sat on her shield, just above the waterline, and relished the goddess's arrival. I didn't know it then, but I was changing. Not that I had never seen her before, even in my master's lands. The goddess filled the sky there, but here, we were beneath her, and she seemed to roll over the earth, a colossal globe of light. Even the Baikal must respect her power.

Six days passed like this.

We crossed stone rivers without a clear sign of a tomb city, but my master could see where we were going. And soon, I saw it, too. In the distance—in a wide, stone river—there was a structure. It looked like colossal pebbles piled up on each other into a tall hill. Closer still, like a sacred place of standing stones. This time, there were three tall, thin ones, and one stout one. Shapes scattered.

"Those are not shamans," I said. No shaman moved so smoothly or quickly.

She squinted and snarled.

The final holy place of ancient standing stones jutted out from this stone river. The hills of the ancestors, the tombs, loomed in the

distance. It was unclear who'd made these standing stones. They didn't appear made by Baikal—the symbols were not like theirs—and they were not of the Mornae. They were some other, ancient people who had left their signs. They'd ceased to exist, or other peoples had absorbed them. The Yatani had once been a splinter of the same tribe as the Kuxul, and before that, some other people. They told stories of seeing the sun descend into a western sea. Even the Mornae had once come from the West, but the Baikal believed they'd been in Vailassa from the world's beginning.

I remained on my master's back as she crouched down to observe. We were not the only ones making a sacred vigil. There was a fire, a small one, and then it went out.

She jerked down for me to get off, and I tumbled out into the water. I scrambled through the thigh-high water as it leached away the warmth I'd always known. It seemed to block the blackrock, which I sensed was far below us. I waded to Eskar's leg—pressing myself to him despite his size.

She took her shield. If there was someone waiting to harm or hinder her, it would be there. She watched from the stalks, leaving me a distance away, holding Eskar's reins. I tried in vain to still myself as my master summoned her rage to prepare for battle. Her heart, her very breath, thumped in me with the sensations of massive muscles and sinews flexing. It would be a lie to say I didn't relish her strength and the destruction she'd unleash. I knew it to be that stench in me, but I'd stopped fighting it since Nevaun's death.

She disappeared, and with every step, the feelings ebbed away.

Waving stalks surrounded me. I drew Eskar's head down with stalk flesh I'd kept from the day before. He devoured it and nuzzled me for more. I obliged, but kept his head down for as long as possible.

The storm came upon us without warning.

A squall of milky rains from the west poured down on us like a waterfall. I'd heard of such storms, but they didn't reach the eastern coast. The dead rain. The spirit rains. These rains came from the far west, from Saylassa, where all that remained of the magnificent golden empire—an empire built upon Sayin's power—was fine gray silt. Tribes believed that the dust of those thousands of dead traveled in the rain, for good or ill. There were even tribes that paid homage to it.

It poured down. Eerie sheets of dust-laden rain crashed down about me in layers and layers of gray curtains. Watery dust squirmed down my skin, the dust of the dead. The ruin that was Saylassa poured out upon Vailassa. I shivered and pressed my face to Eskar's leg.

The rain strengthened, and the stalks shook and cracked under the burden. The rain pelted us like stones and we both struggled. Eskar bowed his head down, shielding his eyes against my chest. I embraced him.

Lightning crackled, and the sea convulsed.

Before I realized what was happening, Eskar bolted. And, like a fool, I ran after him.

I struggled through the water, fighting stalks, the sea, and rain alike.

The stalks brandished like blades before me. White sheets of rain continued to fall, pummeling my head and shoulders.

I called out to him full-throated, terrified. Tears mixed with the silty waters. My throat burned and ached.

I was alone.

I coughed. The dust of the dead lined my throat and mouth. Globes of it gathered inside my cheeks, and I expelled it. Lightning cracked overhead, rippling through the heavy clouds. Fat drops of milky rain still fell on my face, but I couldn't feel my body. The Moon Sea had devoured me.

Clouds shifted... or I did. I saw the stars in their hundreds, thousands, glowing like the faces of the goddess: red, yellow, white, orange, blue... even, in a distant place, purple.

I felt myself begin the journey, the great traveling, and I was not even a priestess, made so by the ritual of my people. I'd only just begun my life.

Regret rippled through me. I should have become so much more, but fate had caught up to me.

The sky darkened and lightning cracked again, returning me to the constant drip of water on the seabed.

A shadow loomed over me. Eyes flared in the flashes of white light. Eskar snorted and brushed my face with his muzzle.

Another shadow blocked out the sky. My master reached down, hesitant to grasp me. I must have looked as frail as the animals they'd put in her hands all those years ago.

I reached up and grasped her hand, curling my cold, numb fingers around hers. She lifted me and flopped me against her shoulder like a wet rag. I grasped her in return. I didn't care about what was proper. In that abysmal place, I let go of everything I'd held bound up in myself. I gripped her hair, her neck, whatever I could to keep myself from the chill.

I coughed, throbbing with cold.

She marched through the sea, the water up to her thighs.

The rains lifted and, in the distance, the pile of pebbles grew into tall, thin hills.

A Mornae city.

Fire. Crackling and popping. A young fire.

The left side of me icy, prickling as the heat thawed me.

Each sensation came to me as if I were restarting my life and I needed to experience it all for the first time.

Kith. A new experience of that familiar heat. It was everywhere. And power. Not like the raw power I'd known when calling to the goddess on the hilltops. My calls had yielded only trickles, so impressive to a giant like Hendar. But here, at the entrance to a Mornae city, a trifle. *Zaeress*, refined by Mornae intention, hummed about me and pressed on my back, my head, and my limbs. Giants used enchanted globes to hold their god's power. The Mornae built cities.

I rested in that throbbing presence.

A lonely drop of rain fell between high walls of sheer, dark rock from a thin slash of gray-white sky. The clouds were still swirling, carried by fierce winds, but the rain came down in slow, dust-laden flurries.

I couldn't move. My body and my damp clothing weighed too much. I blinked, and a puff of silt filled the air. Like a starry night, the dust of the dead lifted, carried away by my breath. I sputtered,

coughing, puffing out silt from my mouth. The dead, I remembered. My clothes clung to me, stinging with cold, but my body burned from an unseen internal fire. I coughed again and my body rattled. Half of me was dry, warm, and cracked. But it wasn't my skin, just dried gray silt.

"Get dry," my master said, a voice out of a long-lost past. For a moment, the briefest moment, I'd forgotten who or what I was.

I struggled to turn my head to the fire. My satchel sat beside me, crushed to half its size by my master's hand.

She'd unpacked her gear, cleaned it, and hung it to dry on the rafters above. She was brushing the silt from Eskar's flanks. Their massive shadows stretched up the stone walls. A shed protected us and cords of firewood from the rain. The Baikal must have built this shelter for those making the vigil and for the shamans who must make their own retreats among the ancestors.

My master's clothes hung from the rafters as well. Neat blocks of gray and white outlined where the silt had covered her like strange war paint. Her weapons sat against the wall, already cleaned and sharpened.

How long had I been sleeping? A pang of guilt washed over me. Why had she brought me? I'd been nothing but a nuisance.

I inched my way up to sitting. The warm, dry silt popped and cracked into fine dust clouds. I tried to shake it off, but there seemed to be endless layers of it.

Eskar whinnied at me, the whites of his eyes flashing in the firelight. Skewers of meat crackled over the small fire. My stomach growled, an ache inching up my chest. I turned my damp side to the fire to dry.

My master remained undaunted by all that had happened, but I shivered as heat and cold battled inside me. I couldn't tell my master

that I was changing. Since we'd entered the Moon Sea, the power of the place had struggled with my goddess. In response, my goddess battled for me, battling to keep me warm—a war I thought I'd won as a child in Hendar's cage.

There was nothing natural about the crevice we were in. The builders of the city had cut an alley through the stone to where they'd decided the entrance would be. The sky had not yet cleared. I closed my eyes, recalling what the arrangement of the stars would be that night, in that season, in that year, in that cycle, in that eon.

Kolanath, the weaver. Or Rilantik, the forge. To other people, it would not have mattered, but to Mornae, the starlight and moonlight held power. The night sky was a key.

The main towers, the ones right above the entrance, rose like black spikes against the sky. They were uneven. A pattern emerged as I studied the tower's tips. Seen from above, they'd look different.

The clouds cleared for a moment, and Bedor's light illuminated the entrance. My breath caught as I looked up at the looming facade of the city. Towers, black as night, drinking in all light, pierced the stone like spears. Sorcerers had raised them from deep in the earth until they'd pierced the ground and rising to the heavens, to the goddess that had beckoned them. Perhaps Nevaun had been here to raise them. I'd never learned his age. From what little my mother had taught me of Mornae history, I thought they'd have built the city four to five thousand years ago, during the second expansion.

"Get dry," my master said again. She'd stopped brushing Eskar and was staring at me. I must have looked like a rat washed up from a swollen river, the way she looked at me. She went back to her work.

A carved-out log served as a pail and a cup. Clean water. I drank it and spat out globs of slimy gray until I could drink it down clean.

“Where’d this come from?” I asked, blurting out the question. It tasted so good. The coolness challenged the burning heat in my bones, and I both sweated and shivered at once.

My master pointed to the base of the wall at the back of the shelter.

The Baikal—I guessed it had been them—had built cisterns along the edge of the stone wall and the roof cached the cleaner water as it passed through layers of grass and reeds.

I washed my face and drank again, swelling my gut with water. I’d never felt extreme hunger before.

My master grunted. “Don’t drink so much. Eat the grass.”

I nodded and nibbled on a cut stalk. I sighed often.

The fire did its work, and soon a cracking layer of silt covered the other side of me. I wanted to jump in the cistern and scrub it all off.

I paused as I lifted my tunic to undress. An enormous bruise darkened my side. It was like my mind had settled in my body again, and every bump I’d received came alive with pain. They flared and ached all at once. I hid my pain from my master, stifling the urge to cry or wince or sigh. I pulled the tunic down and shook out the silt, not wanting to cause my master distress by showing her the damage she’d done. She’d saved my life in the sea. I couldn’t forget that.

No harm done, I repeated to myself, as if the goddess was counting the offenses against her. My mother would have laughed at such superstition. I’d become so used to the Baikal way of thinking by then.

Whether from exhaustion or my master’s hands, I rose like a battered strip of gray linen. She glared at me, running her whetstone over her favorite dagger.

“Eat,” she said.

I took a skewer with smaller chunks on it from the fire. As it cooled, I walked to the edge of our camp, toward the city entrance.

Moonlight sliced through the wisping cloud cover, revealing an enormous doorway. And not enormous like a Baikal, but monumental. The doors reached four times the height of a Baikal, but at the bottom, they had built a smaller doorway framed by the larger one. The large door was for effect. Everything a Mornae made must reach up to the goddess.

The grandeur of the place embarrassed me. I felt myself a poor example for a Mornae, despite the goddess-power burning in my bones. My fingers raked through my hair to let the goddess-light shine out, but caught in tangled hair and mud.

I tore at the meat and chewed. My jaw ached, but I didn't care. It felt good to eat something substantial, and for once, the smell didn't repulse me. I held the empty skewer like a dagger and walked up the wide steps to the entrance. The steps splayed out in wide swathes like the auras of the goddess.

Standing at the base to the entrance, it was like I was standing at the center of the Crow Peaks and looking upward. The facade went up forever, it seemed smooth except for the delicate carvings in it. It would have been impossible to see it all, the glyphs and art. It must be marvelous when the goddess dawned.

I looked back at my master for permission. I'd forgotten my place again. She was standing there, her hammer resting across her hips. She nodded once, but her fists tightened on the haft.

I reached the top step, trembling with excitement and awe. A sliver of blackness ran down the middle of the lower door where someone or something had cut out a chunk of the steel. A smooth cut, so perhaps a terrible magic had done it. Without thinking, I pressed my hand to the massive slab of *kithaun*.

Vandals had scraped or pried away whatever adornment there might have once been. The outlines were there beneath my fingertips. Glyphs and settings missing their stone or gem. Without wanting it, my heart ached for Nevaun. Here at last was a place where my people had lived. Here at last was a sign of their legendary power.

Energy surged through me. Whispers. Dozens of voices. Hundreds. Reaching back into the past in layer upon layer...

Don't let them take you. A reminder of what my mother and Nevaun had taught me about sorcery. I pressed on, past the voices, and the glyph beneath my hand glowed. The whispers ceased, and a profound silence followed.

The inside took on a glow. It must be the light of the glyphs, or my eyes were adjusting to the darkness. I ran my fingers around the fine grooves of the glyphs. Stonecutters had not made these marks. No, it had been fingers like mine that had shaped the stone with the heat of the goddess's power. The glyphs flashed and the fine hairs on my arms lifted, drawn to them.

Torch soot covered the top of the cracked doorway where Baikal, for generations, must have stood deciding whether to enter. I ran my hand up and down the *kithaun*. I willed the entrance to light. My body jerked as the place, just steps in, drew on me to power the mechanisms.

I pulled my hand away and looked back.

My master frowned. "Get ready."

I turned away from the door, feeling the towers looming behind me, calling for me to return. A part of me wanted to tell her to leave. *Let's leave and never come back*, I pleaded in my mind.

Another part swooned at the power... craved to touch it again.

Within was a blackness I couldn't fathom.

I grabbed my bag and patted Eskar goodbye, feeding him stalks in big chunks. My master had cut dozens more for him, and he could drink from the cistern if needed. The rope tie binding him was loose enough to unravel if he bolted. Eskar wasn't so tame that he'd let a thin rope keep him from fleeing danger.

My master waited for me to lead the way.

I took a step inside.

Generations of dust covered the floor.

I stepped in, mindful of the dilapidated state of my hide shoes. A constant stream of air through the entrance blew away any trace of our steps. It whistled and moaned as the air escaped through unseen pathways.

The chamber was the full length of the tower I'd seen above the facade. High above us, the tower opened to the night sky. Kolanath's threads twinkled between the clouds. Starlight hinted at entrances to hallways or chambers high in the tower's inner walls—or deadly perches for archers to shoot from.

My master entered then, her heavy steps cracking the layer of packed silt and dust. If there'd been any giants who'd come through, we'd have noticed.

She held up her hand to the beams of light descending from the tower opening. It was an eerie light, washed out, but it seemed like I could see everything in minute detail. She grimaced and closed her hand to a fist. It was an unnatural light. Something in the tower altered it.

"What—?" she asked, and then stopped, looking about. Her voice sounded as if something had dampened it. "What!" she yelled, but

again her voice sounded no louder than mine. She yelled again, and the same thing happened.

There'd be no giant bellowing here.

"Magic," she muttered.

I suppressed a smile. My people's magic. Such a crude word to use for such feats of power as we were seeing.

My mother's house had come from Vaidolin proper, and she'd been proud of that lineage. She'd looked down on the daughter cities as if they were less. My gaze traveled up the high walls covered with magnificent carvings. Power stored in its stones pulsed into me. Vaidolin must be a marvel—I'd seen nothing made by any tribe that was so lovely as this city.

We walked further in. Even my master must have felt the grandness of the place. Everyone who walked here must have felt small.

Across from the main entrance was the only clear exit, a less grand version of the entry.

"*Zelaunaste*," I whispered.

Above the stone lintel was a set of glyphs with the primary stars of Zelaun, the Shadow Wolf, curling about the glyphs like a vine. That constellation would have been ascendant in the cycle when they'd built the city. That must have been why the city had become the Zelaugr's holy place. When the Mornae had abandoned the city, the Baikal had taken over, claiming it for their ancestors who'd once lost the black crater.

Zeladolin, or something like that, must have been the city's name. Precious stones would have sat in the depressions to represent the stars, but they were empty now, picked clean by looters.

The place ached with forgotten power, like my people.

My master stood at the passage with her hands on her weapons. She did not look impressed by our surroundings. She had one goal, and until she met it, there was nothing else worthy of her interest.

“Lead on.”

I nodded, a small thrill building in me to see deeper inside the city. As I approached the passage, glyphs flickered on our left and right sides. I pressed my hand to the one on the right, with more pressure this time to avoid the echoes, and waited. Lights in the hall ahead flickered, and then dimmed.

“I have two torches,” my master said. “Try again.”

I nodded and focused. The glyphs lit again, a murky haze.

“Move on,” she commanded.

I stepped through and again marveled at how vast the hall felt. My master could fit the width of it with inches to spare, but it was the height that made me marvel. Here, too, there were openings to the sky, high above us.

The lights lining the top of the hall dimmed. I could do nothing about that. My people would have relied on the external light—stars or moons. I ran my hand along one wall, hoping to find a glyph.

“Keep going,” she said.

I stared further into the corridor. Lights flickered in the distance. The hall seemed too long, like an illusion.

“Yes, master,” I said, my feet crunching on dried leaves.

A massive shadow stepped out from a hidden hall and covered me. A hammer smashed into the wall. My master grabbed me from behind and tossed me back the way we’d come. Shadows blossomed about me to shield me from the tumble as I rolled along, glancing off the dusty pavers until I stopped with a *thud*, covered in dust again.

The Baikal must have been one of Talkun's, because he wasted no time in attacking.

Both struggled to summon their power. This was not their god's domain. Neither could ignite a blue globe. I shrunk back, my legs trembling from the violence and brutality of their fight.

He was big—fourteen feet tall and wide as the hallway. He spat insults at her, at me. His body bristled with rage, every vein and muscle bulging. There was little room for either of them to maneuver. My master discarded her larger weapons and switched to short blades.

An axe the size of a man flew past me, and it clattered down to the stone floor behind me. The sound should have echoed, but the magic of the place swallowed it. Our attacker tried to bellow—out of habit—but nothing happened. The magic of the place could not dampen his rage, though, and he charged my master.

I closed my eyes and covered my ears. The sensations filled me anyway. My little power searched through their bodies as I experienced every blow, every movement of their vicious struggle.

Goddess above, I invoked. Let us see another day.

It was one of those prayers that my mother would've scoffed at.

We take power, she'd have said. We use power. There is no asking.

I repeated her words. Time must have slipped by me, because the next thing I noticed was the shallow breaths of our assailant.

My master squeezed the life out of him in one moment and bashed his head against the floor in the next. How she'd done it, I didn't know. I was no warrior. But whether it was sheer rage or determination, or both... she'd done it. The life eased out of his hulking frame.

I rose, trembling, and inched my way closer. I waited until she turned, giving her own rage time to settle. She pressed her hands against either side of the hallway, her head bowed. Then she looked at me. Her eyes were ringed with shadow, brows angled in, and her breath hard. She'd fought the hard way, without Barka or Aelath's gifts.

Clouds shifted, and Bedor's light lit the hall. Just above my head were mosaics, tall figures that stretched up to the ceiling. Someone had plucked the most valuable tiles, leaving behind a cratered surface. Time and wind had smoothed away the mortar.

Our assailant's blood had sprayed the lovely cut stones. The marbles, granites, basalts, and every stone that could hold power, ancient relics of my people's past, imbued with power and thought over thousands of years.

This Baikal's brains had become part of the story they told.

She wiped her weapons on him and then searched him for any sign of his allegiance. He could just be a lone Baikal lurking in the place. There was nothing on him except a necklace of blood-stained bones and what looked like small wolf teeth. She gripped the necklace and crushed the teeth to dust. She stepped over him and motioned to me.

"Move on," she said.

I nodded, my enthusiasm dampened.

My master paused as we passed under a lintel lined with gleaming silver glyphs. They gave off a light of their own. Even after two thousand years, the place still responded to one of its own.

Ahead, piles of bones sparkled like tiny constellations.

“The bones of my people,” I said.

She grunted.

Black bones arranged in piles adorned niches in the walls where the Baikal had made effigies of their gods. Most were small bones, but for the major gods, there were arms and legs. Skulls, too. I avoided looking at these. Someone ought to burn them and return them to the goddess.

Baikal had made piles of white, blanched bones throughout the vast space. Of Baikal, men, or animals, I couldn't tell in the dim chamber. They'd also arranged pebbles around the piles.

“What do they mean?” I asked.

She stared at me, and then shrugged. They had kept that from her. Women shouldn't know the secret life of the Sons of the Sea, their secret rituals and beliefs. The only ones who did came here with their mates, to see them through their last days.

She grunted and pointed at tracks crossing from another side of the chamber. We followed the tracks through the piles.

The chambers were large—so large that it was hard to tell where they ended. Thick shadows swelled from the edges, swirling over the sand, and receded where we walked. Even the starlight above had no effect on it. The stone walls reached to the sky, seeking the goddess. That was how I thought of it.

My heart soared.

The mosaics of gray, black, and white, even vandalized and broken, moved me. My ancestors had offered homage to the heavens in their long, sleek dresses, the men bare-chested and carrying black spears. I'd only ever known the coloring of my mother and Nevaun, but here on these walls was such a variety as was possible. Every combination of the three colors defined the women and men and their attire, the muted colors seen by starlight and moonlight. Silver was the only metal. Only sorcerers wore an unusual color: blue for the goddess of wisdom and knowledge.

Everywhere I looked there were signs of the goddess. The entry chamber seemed dedicated to the blue goddess. Blue stones were abundant—or had been. Thieves had pried the lowest ones loose. Above us, stones rose like crashing waves in all shades of blue, like Rigid's bone garb.

We crossed through another hall to a vast, tall, circular chamber.

"Why is it so still?" she asked me, trying to whisper.

I shook my head, but her eyes narrowed.

"It must be the power of the place," I suggested. "It swallows sound."

I imagined it was thus because the stone would have made even the smallest sound echo.

“That Baikal’s axe made no sound when he threw it on the floor.” I also whispered, even though there was no need.

She nodded. I sensed a growing unease in her. Every step we took inside chipped away at her confidence. Beneath so much stone, separated from the winds and far from the sea, her ability to draw on their power waned.

As fate would have it, as she weakened, I felt something awakening in me.

I ran my hands along the walls, hoping to gain more knowledge to share with my master. I knew from my mother that Mornae impressed their intentions into stone and objects. The heat oppressed me, and I shed my garments until I remained in only a long, thin tunic and soft boots.

In the stillness of my being, I sensed a presence. I thought it must be the goddess.

Then, it happened. My nose bled. I wiped it with my battered cloak bundled in my arms. The farther we went, the more my spirit lifted, as if I was to call to the goddess with my whole being. Thoughts which I had long ago buried were now building: I was Mornae. A future matron. A priestess. My mother’s pride welled up in me. It unnerved me.

I thought my master would kill me if she knew what was happening to me. I feared it.

We stopped in a grand chamber and she lit one of the torches. She handed it to me. “Don’t move. Hold it up as high as you can.”

I grasped it with two hands and hefted it as high as I could manage. The torch’s yellow light contended with the shadows, but the scene came to the fore.

“There was a fight,” she said, moving across a stretch of the room. “Here. Blood.”

She motioned me over, and I stood near her. There was a great puddle of blood, now dried. Someone had dragged a body along the ground here, and there was blood spattered in other places. The tracks of smaller men were clear—their footprints my size or smaller. There had been a great struggle. Blood stained the stone floor in the shape and size of a Baikal. I pointed to something sparkling in the dust.

She scooped it up and ran a finger through the sapphire specks. A crushed globe. “Son of the Sea.”

We followed the tracks through an arch and down a long hall. The walls of the hallway were pure *kith*. I thought my bones would melt within me. I let out deep breaths, trying to release my discomfort.

The hall emptied into a vast space, rounded by a magnificent walkway. Above us, the rock opened wide like a small crater. It must pay homage to the immense crater of Vaidolin. The stars blazed, amplified by the enchantments wrought by my people. My heart ached from the beauty of it.

Buildings carved in the walls of the cavern glimmered, painted with white lacquer. At the center, like a mirror of the night sky, was a pit of darkness. We inched closer, crossing what would have been a wide thoroughfare.

The sun should have been rising, but the sky didn't lighten. Whatever magic covered the opening made the sky darken so that the stars of another season became visible. It was like a perpetual night, as if Sayin did not exist. We both stared upward. I basked in the power capable of obliterating Sayin's light. My master made her hands into hard fists.

Angry. Always angry.

A thick blanket of shadow covered the pit. The level we were on seemed to be an antechamber. The actual city must be below. I marveled at this, never having thought my people lived so far beneath the ground. If I looked hard enough, I could make out a lake with greenish-white water. Something gave off light down there, but only if I looked beyond the thick darkness. It was difficult, as the darkness filled the spaces behind my traveling gaze.

My master could not see it, though. It vexed her, and she growled in response.

She walked along the edge and shook her head at the place where the bloody tracks ended.

“He went down that way. Or someone did. There has to be a way down.”

I peered into the pool of shadows again. The depths beckoned to us.

To me.

She walked around the thoroughfare, the faces of the buildings looming over her. I followed, looking for clues. We found other tracks in the fine dust, and soon after that, we discovered where Yorl had made his vigil. A fire pit, used by generations before him, had been cold for days. He and those before him had made offerings to the sea god carved in oak and set in a niche. Offerings of shells and polished stones and carved bone figures piled up around the block of wood with its dour visage.

“Is this where they made their vigil?” I asked.

My voice warbled, and I felt a tickle in my nose and a cascade of blood down the back of my throat. The dry blood around my nostrils flaked away, and behind it, a fresh spring of red swelled. I patted my nose with my sleeve.

Walking around the display, I feigned interest. "I've seen nothing like this."

She offered no answer except to glare at the trinkets laid out, and then at me. Goddess above, it felt like she could pierce through every pretense.

"What are these words?" I asked, waving my hand over the carved symbols without touching them.

She stared at them long and hard. "The word of Barka: 'Who will step off the cliff to meet me?'"

The song's next line came to mind. "Who will walk into the waves and meet me?"

I crouched down before the effigy and inspected the offerings. I hid my bleeding nose from her. It was odd for giants to arrange things. I'd never known such depths of Baikal devotion except in shamans. The city must have frightened the Baikal. They respected size and strength, but there were other, greater, unfathomable powers in the world.

"He is down in that pit," she said. "This means nothing."

I nodded, at a loss. Their beliefs baffled me even after so many years of living with them. Like the rage that powered them, their duty to their gods changed with the wind.

Blood tickled my nose again. I wiped at it, not even stopping to look at how much of it stained my sleeve, but she'd already walked to the pit. She stood there with starlight shining on her like the gods had ordained her to be there.

I reached out to steady myself against a wall. I breathed in and out, putting my head back to ease the bleeding.

Above us, around the edge of the opening, in the invisible roof of the place, I saw lights flickering and sometimes shooting across the ceiling like there was a dome there. For the briefest of moments, I

saw shapes and forms, lights and lines. The place lightened, the shadows blazing. My head throbbed, and I clasped my hands to my chest.

“We’ll need a way down,” she said.

“Yes, master.” I was weary.

She pulled out a stalk and handed it to me. “Find a way.”

We searched and searched. In the end, we stood where we'd started, the dried blood tracks between us.

My master peered over the edge. "What do you see?"

"There is a green water lake. White light." My voice sounded small in this place, but also profound and ageless.

"A place of the dead?"

I shook my head. Her fist tightened at my ear.

"I don't know, master. It's hidden by powerful magic."

"You see it?"

"It's of my people."

"Find a way down, then."

"Isn't it forbidden?"

She stood over me as if I'd challenged her in her own yard.

"The god-words," I said, pointing at the stone lip rounding the pit.

A line of symbols—not as ancient as the city, not written into the stone, but written out with a rust-colored paint. Blood, most likely. I read the words aloud. The shamans uttered them at the high summer moot. They were the ancient laws of territory, where the Baikal ended and the Mornae, the daemons, as they called them, began.

She shrugged. "Such laws are for others."

"What of the gods?"

She snorted. "What of them?" Her brow furrowed, her eyes two dark caverns.

There was an invisible line over which even she should not pass, lest she declare war. Though her brother may have already declared it if he'd dared go down beyond these symbols. Talkun had called him a daemon, no doubt possessed by the Dark Goddess. *My goddess.*

My master motioned to the pit. "Find a way down."

I crept along the edge of the void. The inside wall of the pit was slick, but as I moved along, running my hand along the lip, I found a rougher section. Still, it was dangerous. The pit's bottom, the lake, seemed both close and far. It could be a thousand feet to the bottom, or only ten. Only descending would confirm. The Mornae who had lived here must have descended another way, or by different means. This place seemed abandoned, though.

"The rock here is rougher, master. It may be possible to climb down."

She peered into the void for a moment and then at me, gauging my truth. I moved aside as she came close and evaluated the stone with her huge hands. She took out two spikes from her pack and, leaning over the edge, jammed one of them into the wall. It wasn't blackrock.

"We'll go down here."

She rested her shield against the wall and tucked her belongings behind it. She kept the daggers strapped to her. And me, her Mornae charm, she motioned over. Dread washed over me. Would she cast me in headfirst? Instead, she crouched down for me to climb into the

harness. I clambered on and my stomach hollowed out as she turned to descend. I hung over the swirling darkness.

Her body tensed as she grasped the shallow grooves in the stone floor, enough to bear her weight. Then she drove the first spike in and lowered herself down. With the iron rims of her boots, she kicked into the rock and made footholds. I sat on her back, useless, legs dangling, a massive lump in my throat.

Around twenty feet down, the bleeding started again. I tucked my head between her shoulder blades and buried my face in my cloak, pinching my nose and smothering the bubbling and puckering sounds I made while trying to staunch the bleeding. *The sacred places require payment*, my mother used to say. At least until you have become part of them, one with them. A priestess must pay the price for such power. The hundred-year price... and then the cycles.

My master seemed untroubled and only grew stronger with each strike into the stone facade. We kept descending. I looked down; the bottom didn't look any closer, but I said nothing. She'd defeat the wall like everything else in her life. Every thrust of a spike sent a shudder through me.

The right spike wouldn't budge. She'd driven in it too far. Snarling, she stabbed one of her daggers into the wall's softer parts. We descended two more of her steps and stopped. Her boots scraped left and right. The wall had turned smooth again.

"We should return," I whispered. I held my head back and blood ran down the back of my throat.

"How far is it?"

I covered my nose with a handful of my cloak and looked down. A glob of blood escaped through my fingers and shot down into the darkness. "We're several yards from the bottom, master." The pit floor moved up and down, teasing. I couldn't be sure.

She growled, a low roar building up in her.

I gasped as she let go and dropped to the pit floor. My teeth chattered as the shock of it rippled through her bones and into me. She swung about, knives drawn. The opening above the city looked so far away, hundreds of feet it seemed. The light was faint and clouded by whatever lit the lake. It was all a strange illusion. Shapes of light and shadow flickered on the cavern walls from the soft rippling of the glowing water, bubbling up from deep within the earth.

Figures, pillars, and shapes shifted in the changing starlight. The lake was wider than the opening we'd come down from, and a black sand beach circled it. Beyond the sand, darkened arches dotted the wall where hallways ran farther into the city.

My master leaned down, and I crawled out of the harness onto the sandy floor. I tore off my tattered slippers. My feet dug into deep, warm sand made of crushed blackrock.

We set out to search the lake's black beach, but fog-like shadows as tall as me covered the ground, only receding where we stepped and closing in again behind us. On the second lap, she found a Baikal mallet, part of its iron head splintered off from having struck a mass of *kith*, an island in the black sand.

Along one side of the cavern wall, halls led away from the lake and into the depths of the city. They were dark and foreboding, but clear of bones and other Baikal remnants. The walls there were lovely and untouched by looters. Mosaics of fine stone, even gems, adorned them. The world had stopped one day and left everything to rest in perpetual quietude. The air was neither stale nor damp, as expected.

My nose had stopped bleeding, but my skull and spine pulsed. My bones throbbed with unnatural heat.

We kept moving across the expanse, lapping the lake, and piercing the shroud of darkness that lay over the place. Near where we'd come down, two mounds emerged from the shadows, one large and another small. The darkness had masked them from us.

My master let out a low cry that rumbled into a growl and threatened to become a roar.

It was Yorl. Just as dead as Talkun claimed.

The oracle had failed. Our fates were no longer entwined, or so it seemed.

Yorl's mangled body lay there with his arms and legs bending in strange ways. His head was a mashed sludge of black hair, blood, brains, and sand.

My master stood over him, and I thought for sure that she'd pound him with his own hammer. But she must respect the dead, and he was her other half, according to the oracle. Despite him being an inferior Baikal in my mind—Hendar, Fennir, and even Fain were what I called noble Baikal—he had been a critical part of her quest for the chieftain's rise.

She poked at a wound in his gut, whence the blood had flowed out. She brought his arms and legs to their proper position, and then turned him over, groaning at his weight. There'd been a thrust into his left kidney, and then a cut across, the depth of it weakening with each inch. Yorl was thicker than an old oak tree, but the wound had killed him.

No way for a Baikal to die; from behind, without a chance of defense. My master set him back down and searched for his globes. The fall had smashed six of them. Two others, depleted of power, were intact. From within his tunic, she pulled out his vigil cord on which he'd made knots for the days he'd been there. She counted them out.

“Thirty-five days. Rot will start soon.”

The god-favored didn't rot right away like most people and animals did. Our gods' power preserved us for a time. That was why the Mornae burned a body as soon as possible, to release the power stored there. Those gathered at the funeral breathed in their *zaeress*, the accumulated wisdom of the dead person's long life. The Baikal held similar ideas, though they kept bones as charms. Letting rot set was a gross injustice and offense against the god whose power abided in the dead person. Her brow furrowed, calculating her next move.

“A short man struck him,” I said. She nodded. The angle was strange, too low for one such as Talkun or any Baikal. Low for a Mornae as well, unless the spearman had been crouching. I touched the smooth edges of the wound. “A spear, maybe? A powerful spear.”

“They fought above and cast him down here.”

The other body had landed ten paces away. Yorl's heavy cloak wrapped the body, but was burned in places. He'd fallen into the down blazing. I pulled and tugged at it and the waft of rot struck me, but the man was still intact. A god-favored man. I searched his clothes and found a pouch of rotted meat. His features were unfamiliar. The man's hands grasped a hunter's bow. I touched the man's hair. It was light brown, with golden hairs. Like Ola's strands, but fewer and less bright. He must have come from the far South.

“Such a bow could not have hurt Yorl,” I said. I was no hunter, but I knew the thick skin and iron sinew of a Baikal.

My master scoffed, turning away. This dead man had been part of the fight, but he couldn't have killed Yorl. A cut like that could have only one source—a god-favored one. One capable of great enough power to make a cut that deep, that clean.

I looked at her, half-afraid she might draw the same conclusion.

“Blacksteel,” I said, anticipating her. “Mornae?”

She nodded and squinted at the lake. I stood and followed her gaze. A sudden, strong breeze blew over the water. Her hand shoved me behind her. She crouched, using Yorl’s hammer as a poor shield, but it was too late.

Black pellets the size of my thumbnail peppered her. A second volley shot struck her, and she growled away the pain. I felt it all, of course. My vision glazed over, hiding in her shadow.

A pellet rolled toward me and stopped at my foot. I snatched it up. The pellet hummed with power, and I closed my fist around it.

My master hunched over.

The lake turned dark as a heavy, unnatural shadow crept over it toward us.

I was both elated and terrified.

My master fell forward onto her hands and knees. “Fight me fair!” she bellowed. Her voice was free to rage in this space.

I sank back into her shadow, my feet shuffling in the black sand, until I felt the cavern wall against my back. Again, as when I was a girl, I watched as my world changed before my eyes, to wait for someone else to decide my fate. But not just my fate this time—both of ours, together. This time, it wouldn’t be a scarlet giant, a stranger, but one of my kind who would rescue me.

But from what? Whose side was I on? How quickly I altered!

Chuckles, voices like Nevaun’s, filled the space. My heart ached with need and desire. I couldn’t help it. Old wounds opened,

burning... yearning. If only he could be there with me, helping me to understand. Confusion wound about me like an iron wire.

“You have violated the ancient law,” a Mornae man said. Since the time of my captivity, I’d only ever heard my mother’s tongue from Nevaun. “He fouls the air.”

She roared at their words, not understanding. She picked their black pellets out of her flesh and tossed them aside. Blood sprayed out on the black sand. None of the strikes had been lethal, but fatigue spread through her limbs. She reached for Yorl’s hammer but could only brush the end of the handle with her fingers. If she wanted it, she’d need to lunge for it.

She played the wounded prey, waiting for them to step out of their protective shadows. What strength she had left built up, layer upon layer of rage.

“We have every right to slay you,” the Mornae said. “You’ve violated the accord laid down by your ancestors.”

The shadows pressed. The hairs on my arms rose. I sensed them now, their long limbs bearing ancient spears.

They prepared to execute her.

I didn’t know what to do. Here at last was my liberation. Her body coiled and tensed for battle. Her feelings, like the feelings of my mother before her, swelled in me, overcoming any affinity with my people. I opened my mouth to cry out, and the goddess spoke through me.

The cavern shook, stone trembling down to the core. Even the lake rippled in its tranquility. The shadows drew back. The goddess’s voice rose into an earth-shattering crescendo as loud as thunder, faster and faster, until a great hum settled on the place.

And the Mornae hummed with it, called to order by a priestess.

“Face of the Goddess,” one voice said. His reverent tone surprised me. The shadows receded, granting us more space. “We saw the dome lit. We came from far off to see if the city has returned to its rightful owners.”

“High Priestess,” another said. “We sensed you. You drew us here.”

“We did not expect you to have a giant in your service,” one said.

“Of what house are you?” another asked.

“Of what line?” the first asked.

A priestess keeps her secrets. I didn’t answer. I couldn’t see myself as anything but the thrall of the daughter of Aelath. My mother had spoken our house name in a dream, but it remained buried there, guarded and defended by her still.

They continued humming with the call I’d made. Their deep, lovely voices melded with it. My heart sang with them, lifted. At that moment, we united.

“You have strengthened us, Face of the Goddess,” one said. “We can remove this creature from your presence. Come with us. We have such a need for you,” he pleaded.

He was beckoning me home. I felt lightheaded. I *wanted* to go. He called to me like Nevaun himself from beyond the stars.

I rampaged through them. Just as the Baikal had done to the Yatani all those years ago, I’d bully my way in to get the information.

What houses were they from? Would they kill me as a rival?

I had no reason to trust them, and every reason to trust my master. Except that one time, she’d never struck me. Any matron could accept the demands of a dangerous political situation. She’d done it for both of us. I understand that now. My life took on a sparkling clarity as my little gift poured out of me. I let out a deep moan, my body shuddering with the goddess-call.

She tried to rise, and her fist landed next to my foot. She pressed her skin to mine, and a wave of strength rolled through me.

Something unlatched in me; something opened. Feelings flooded.

Never had I felt myself so taken with another's feelings. We were a single person. I was in her, and she was in me. Our powers, our gods, were as one.

In my concern for her, I had allowed the fortress of my mind and feelings to be open to her. Like my mother, I'd been desperate for her to know my mind before I left, sure that we'd meet death here. Though she was a creature so different from me, I wanted her to know.

"Step into the light," I commanded the Mornae. "Let me see you. You call me 'Face of the Goddess,' but you lurk in the shadows."

They didn't obey. They served another.

"You have violated the agreement by killing a Son of the Sea on Baikal land," I said, speaking for my master.

"That is not so, Face of the Goddess," one said, annoyed. "A wanderer killed him... though with a weapon of our making."

Another one said, "It is *you* who have violated the agreement by crossing into *our* territory."

It pained me that he lumped me in with the Baikal when I yearned to be with them, my mother's people. And yet, there I stood, speaking for the Daughter of Aelath, her mouthpiece.

"You speak lies, daemons." The closest Mornae word for daemon was an insult: *ghosts*.

I bullied my way into their feelings. What did it matter now if we offended them? We were on opposite sides. Their minds were stronger than a Baikal's, yet weaker than my mother's mind had

been. They *were* like ghosts. Weak, and no longer as they had been. Not as my mother had been or how I remembered her.

They feared *me*.

My master's hand wrapped around my calf, and a frigid chill ran through me, like the waters of the Moon Sea. Before I knew it, shadows erupted from my body—forming a barrier in front of me, absorbing a single *kithaun* dart and driving it into the ground before me. It would have killed me.

“Come with us!” the Mornae yelled. “We need you more than this... this beast!”

Frustration rang in his voice. So much that he would violate all the Mornae's sacred traditions and harm a priestess. Their desperation was unexpected. Undignified.

“Show me your spears,” I said. “Show me the badge of Isilayne.”

Their shadows receded. They were paltry, illusory. Meant to frighten giants and non-Mornae.

I pressed more, and the goddess answered me by filling the space with a thick wall of protective shadow, enveloping my master and me.

“Come into the light!” I commanded. “Let me see you, then!”

It was difficult, like with Fennir and others. Their minds were more prepared, though not enough for my rampaging queries. As indelicate as a giant's hands, I tried to wrangle the truth from them.

The shadows shifted.

“You've made your choice,” one said.

Pain. Sadness. *Oh yes*, I thought, *let them suffer it*.

The *kith* beneath and above and all around vibrated with disdain. They were not worthy of this place.

But I was.

I don't know what overcame me, then. They disgusted me. As the Mornae of my mother's age disgusted her. They'd cast her out because she'd known their weakness.

I threw back my head, breathing in the Dark. My power unleashed and chased after them as they hurried away down deep pathways beneath the city. A wave of sadness slammed into me as my gift returned, unable to follow them farther. My people proved not to be saviors at all, and my mother's bitterness became mine.

They had not left to protect me, but to protect their own secrets. My power would have cracked open their minds. In their enemies' hands, I was more lethal than all their *kithaun* weapons.

There was no time to mourn, to bemoan the fate of my people. I had made the right choice to stay with my master who was not afraid to stand, if only for herself. The Mornae had remained in the shadows the whole time.

They had no courage.

They'd not been willing to fight for me, despite their great need.

And I... I had made my choice.

The shadows dissipated, but the call still echoed. A priestess had not called to the goddess here in ages. I glanced up and saw a marvel. Lines raced across the invisible ceiling—the dome, the Mornae called it. The current configuration of the sky... night, the season, the year, the cycle, the eon. The lines flashed, pulsing with the echoes of my call. I gasped as the lines flared one final time and disappeared. The Crown constellation and others drifted past, peeking through a cloudy sky.

I swayed, almost falling over, but something kept me in place. A chill ran through me alongside a squeezing pain.

My master let go of my leg and slid over to the rock wall, propping herself up against it. Her head lolled across her chest. She

plucked out the remaining slugs.

“Fake,” she said, tossing one at me. I caught it, her bright blood splattering me and smearing in my hand. With the blood came a black resin.

“How, then?”

She shrugged. Her globes were dull, her power deprived of its energy. Still, her Baikal skin resisted ordinary weapons. I rubbed the bullet some more. It had a *kithaun* tip. The rest was southern steel. I pressed the tip with my thumb, but detected no sign of an enchantment. No glyph adorned it. It seemed quite ordinary. None of our attackers had the knowledge. None of them were like Nevaun.

“The tips are blacksteel,” I said, tossing the slug away. “Just enough to cut you. And there is poison.” It was subtle and sunk into my fingers and through my hand. Then, it faded.

She nodded. “I’m numb.”

I searched through my satchel, but the Moon Sea’s waters had invaded my stash of herbs. I crouched down beside her and opened a fold of oiled cloth. Inside was a paste for burns. What else could I try? I scrounged through the little linen packets, each one labeled by Ola with her cryptic marks. The silty water had blurred the marks and turned it all into a pasty mash. Still, the marks of her people, unknown to Baikal or Veikal, served us well. Not that anything in my herbal stash was harmful—not unless you had the knowledge of combining them. I wouldn’t risk giving my master an unlucky combination.

She covered the satchel with her hand, drawing my attention to her. “Keep watch. It will pass.” She grimaced, fighting against the weakness, and pulled Yorl’s hammer to herself with her left arm. “Take this.” She handed me her dagger. It was like a short sword in my hands.

I shook my head, confused. I didn't know how to fight.

"Keep watch!" she snarled, frustrated with me and with the effects of the poison.

I turned and crouched down between her and the lake. The faint afterglow of the ceiling bathed the water in a strange twilight. The lake's center steamed, and the air took on a more pleasant smell. The longer I sat there, my eyes adjusted to the lighting. I fought exhaustion, and it was only the snuffle of a snore from my master that kept me from drifting off. I watched the stars overhead and lost myself for a time in their movement.

"Water," she whispered. She looked like death.

"I'll taste it first."

I ran over to the lake and dipped my hand into the green waters. Bright green lichen and algae grew along the edges and on the rocks lining the bottom. A spring bubbled at the center, and the lake was only a foot deep until it dropped into a stony crack, its source. I scooped up water and drank. It tasted like warm rock. I drank more. It seemed safe enough. Baikal had iron guts, so I didn't worry about illnesses. Not when she was dying of thirst. One problem at a time.

She threw her water skin at me and I filled it. She guzzled it down. Three times I filled it for her. Within two hours—I could tell by reading the sky above—the worst of the paralytic had passed, and she was clenching her fists. Shortly after, she was standing.

She avoided looking at Yorl.

"Master?" I asked.

She staggered over to the lake and collapsed into the water. She splashed water on herself, spreading her grime into the pure lake.

She knelt there, scanning the surrounding area. “Where does it go?” She pointed at the greasy swirls. They moved away from her, carried away from the source. The water had to escape somewhere to keep the pool from flooding.

“Master, we should find a way out. I think they will come back.”

She ignored me.

“They think we... the Baikal have broken the truce.”

She chuckled and stood up. She raised her head, turning on her heels and facing all sides of the cavern one by one.

“The Sons of the Sea!” she bellowed to the shadows. “The Zelaugr, Beloved of Barka and Aelath, will meet you in light or shadow!”

She turned to me, eyes hard, pointing at the water. “Where does it go?”

I searched and found little canals in the sand leading the water away down into deeper parts of the city. I crouched down to touch one canal of *kithaun*-laced stone.

A voice whispered. I turned, but my master was just washing.

I inched over, letting starlight strike a pipe. Miniscule glyphs, a foot apart, flared. I dared touch one again. The whisper of a single voice, an incantation... an intention to bear water away. It repeated, but that was all there was. A sorcerer wouldn't impress himself into something so trivial. Carrying water was the only magic he needed the pipe to perform.

My master had washed, but it had just made her look even more ragged. Dark circles lined her eyes and shadows played across a deep frown.

“There are canals, pipes of blacksteel and stone leading the water away.”

She glanced over at the heap that was Yorl's body. "Any magic pipes to carry him out of here?"

The height of the place was daunting. It hadn't looked that way before, but we'd descended hundreds of feet.

"Your kind like to play games." Her fists tightened, leather bracers creaking. "The deeper we go, the worse it gets."

I tilted my head, but what she said seemed true. Pride kindled in me.

She huffed. "Search the place."

"Yes, master." At my half-hearted words, she turned, looming over me. I bowed my head. "*Yes, master,*" I said more firmly. Meeting my people was a distraction I could ill afford. Being Mornae didn't make us allies. In fact, from the stories my mother told me, we were more likely to be enemies.

She grunted and moved on, her legs shambling through the sand, stepping on the pipes without concern for them. One cracked under the weight of her, but she didn't care. My master could never settle for long. Already, she was plotting and planning. My master walked along the cavern wall—looking down passages, taking stock of our situation.

I felt energetic. Triumphant, even. I had called to the goddess without the memory of my mother's death to guide me. I could do it on my own.

The act of a true priestess... a matron.

Still, the problem remained, hardening like the rain of the dead on our skin. How to escape? How to fulfill the oracle?

O ur victory was short-lived.

We could see no way out of that pit. My master focused on the way we'd come down. That made sense. The arches were narrow, the halls shrouded by a heavy darkness—more than natural darkness—and our enemies must have run down one of them. She tried in vain to grab hold of the rougher part of the wall. She'd dropped from high up, and even her best jump fell short. We'd left the bulk of our supplies above, such was her ambition.

Heart in throat, I ventured around the lake, peering down halls and even stepping inside, but not far. Who knew how deep they went and what dwelt there? The slight incline made me think the halls went farther down into the earth. The air was dry. Not stale... just dry and warm.

My raw nostrils had stopped bleeding. The insides were scabbing. My throat felt the same, and my eyes stung. Thin skin frayed and bled, even around my fingernails, but my master must not have noticed because it was so dark for her.

Days passed, and as I suspected, the sun never shone above us. Only stars. The magic of the dome continued to work, but I dare not try to light it again. At least we had water. I tasted the grasses

growing on the lake floor. They were not much different from the tall grasses of the Moon Sea. I ate them and left her the stalks and dwindling rations.

During one of my searches, I found a Baikal mark in a tunnel. I ran back to her.

I pointed to the hallway across the lake. "There are marks there. The same color as above. Baikal."

I showed her, and she leaned down to look more closely.

Her face was gaunt. A giant doesn't fast well. Dark circles deepened around her eyes. Her hair was dull and matted, a tangle.

The hall was very tall, but of a width fit for a Mornae's shoulders. She turned sideways and inched down the hallway, her dagger extending into the shadows.

I followed behind her, and glyphs ignited above us. She looked back at me, but I only shrugged. I'd done nothing. As we moved, the glyphs continued to turn on, and dimmed as we moved away from them. We continued with her sliding along the smooth, unadorned hall. Her chest twinged with hope as we came across an arch leading into a chamber three lengths wide and long. She peered around the edge and then entered. I ran my hand along the edge and light raced along the walls and ceiling. The chamber was tall, like everything here, but there was no tower extending up to the sky. She could have jumped up and scraped the ceiling with her fingertips.

A large totem of Barka stood at the far end of the chamber. Three of me could have circled it round with arms outstretched. Other effigies flanked him. Aelath of the winds and sky, Melka of the woods, and the other lesser gods and ancestors. There were none of the Dark Goddess, but what need was there for that here in this place where everything spoke of her? I could only imagine what it

would be like to have her sit above the ceiling, filling it and bathing everything in her glorious light.

My master approached the sanctuary.

“You will tell me Barka’s words when you return,” she said. That’s what her father had said to Yorl before he left for his vigil.

She ran her hand along the words carved into the wood. The cuts were inches deep, the edges smooth from all the hands that had touched it over the centuries. The words on the effigy above had been a guidepost and a challenge. That totem stood for a false god. That was a god not for chiefs, but for followers.

She scowled. “You have stepped into the waves, into the depths, to find me. Now, rise to the cliff side.”

To the hill, the sacred place. *Out* of this place.

That was how I understood it. Here, in the depths, in the forbidden place where only the brazen, the boldest Baikal would dare go, was the true god-word.

The shamans must have known, and the chief. That was the great secret.

To venture down into this place and meet the true face of their god. It should have been a moment of victory, another step in the path of our divine fate, but it was only another riddle, another obstacle. This time, it seemed insurmountable.

She let out a deep groan. A growing rage built up. Her hands curled into tight fists. Her globes glowed.

I stepped back. Must the gods vex her so? This trial was more than anyone should have needed to endure. So I thought then, in my innocence. Even if she spoke the word to the chief to prove she’d reached the correct place of vigil, she could not sit the rise without Yorl. He’d been dead weight to her from the beginning. He hadn’t

found this totem for himself, but been a carcass cast down to a grave.

She paced, fists creaking, undeterred. “There has to be a way. Look for rope. Something.”

I wandered back to the lake and gazed up at the starlit dome. The stars twinkled at me, brighter than I could have seen them outside. If I stared long enough, the magic of the place made a lone star flare and appear larger. I blinked and looked about. I’d been standing there, staring at the same star, for an hour.

She grunted from inside the hall.

I searched more passages, especially those that narrowed too much for her to enter, but they only led far down and had no side chambers. When the air changed, sometimes becoming sour or bitter, I backed away and returned.

I never had good news.

We slept in the god-chamber, but during the rest of the day, I’d sit out by the lake and bask in the starlight.

Five days had passed since the Mornae had come looking for me. They didn’t live here. As they said, they’d come because the dome had been lit. They seemed long gone.

My master paced in front of the effigies, repeating the words carved on Barka as if there were a secret in them.

I could try to call the Mornae back, but to do what? Beg for help?

She looked at me, frowning, and then turned back to the god. Her face was dark, her shoulders stooped.

I went back and cast a hook of white bone into the green lake. I’d made the line from the thread of Yorl’s cloak. For hours, I tried to entice a fish to bite. Shadows darted about the apple-green bottom of the lake. The fish wasn’t for me. My master needed food. She’d finished the last of the rations—although she’d grown tired of the

stalks, and they sat in a corner drying out. The least I could do was help feed her.

I trusted she'd come up with a plan.

She always did.

One night, while I slept by the lake, she woke me. She hovered over me, a great shadow blocking the cavern ceiling.

Excitement overtook me. "Did you find a way out?"

I tried to sit up, but her huge hand pressed me down, curling around my neck and head. The even thump of her heart lulled me into a trance.

"Speak my name," she said hoarsely. Her greasy, dirty hair draped around my face. Her sour breath covered me. Starvation had a smell. So did madness.

"Syral of the Zelaugr." My voice trembled, small and thin—almost a question.

"I will be chief," she said. "I will unite the tribes. I will be chief of chiefs. I will make war on the daemons. My name will resound unto the endless cycle. Repeat it. Speak the god-word."

Her sweat fell on me, rolling down my cheeks. She pressed her forehead to my face, brushing my nose. Her hand squeezed me.

I couldn't believe what was happening. I couldn't accept it. My lips trembled, and nothing came out.

"Speak!" She shook, restraining herself from crushing me.

I did as she commanded, repeating what she'd said. Only someone like her would *force* herself on the gods. Only someone like her would try to bend them to her will.

"Make the sign," she said. Her voice quavered.

Palms up, I held my hands at my chest, and then let them fall to my sides. I dared not touch her. I dared not struggle. The terror of my mother's last moments surfaced in my mind, but unlike her, I

resigned myself to dying. I had lived much longer than she or I ever expected.

Still, tears welled in my eyes, blurring everything. I never thought I'd die at my master's hand. Not here. Not like this.

Her fingers forced my mouth open, and she stuffed something into it. She forced it closed.

"Chew." Ragged breaths buffeted my face.

I moved my mouth against the force of her fingers. The substance turned to mush in my mouth. The bitter juice ran down my throat so that I coughed. She pried my mouth open, turned my head, and I spat out the mash. My mouth went numb. A powerful sedative, powerful enough to affect me, even if for a brief time. She must use it to ease her most severe pains.

"I will offer you to the gods," she said. Her fingertips trembled on my face. "They will not deny me my destiny. Your goddess will give me the god-word I need. You will no longer be a curse to me."

My face went numb, like a stony mask reaching back over my skull and through my jaw. I still felt her hand, like a distant pressure. Everything was dark and darker, shadow upon shadow. The goddess didn't rise to defend me. Had she forsaken me? My mind fluttered with desperate explanations.

This must be my fate.

My eyes struggled against the urge to close. A small knife flashed in her other hand—bright with fire, the steel hot and ready. With her three free fingers, she kept my body still. The world went black, the starlight slowing and swirling. My face and body went numb, distant. And then I felt a pressure again as she forced my mouth open and covered my eyes. My jaw unhinged. My face contorted like that man's whose face she'd crushed before my eyes.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I let out a choking sob.

The last thing I heard before I fell asleep was a grunt.

She'd cut out my tongue.

Clots of blood ran down the back of my throat and pain shot through me like a lightning strike. She'd propped me up in a corner across from the Baikal's gods. Blood blackened the front of my tunic. Bruises marred my body where she'd held me. I felt like a broken doll.

Two long pieces of stalk sat beside me. It was all I could consume, a sign of how my life would be from now on.

She sat by the idol of her god, surrounded by stacks of bones—her ancestors and mine. Her globes were dim specks of light, like a constellation dangling around her chest. Her hands were out in supplication, but in the Baikal way: on the floor, palms up. It was the only way to get a Baikal to bow their head to anyone. Arrogant, the lot of them.

All of them. Even Hendar.

Especially Hendar.

As I sat in the darkness of my corner, surrounded by the stone art of my people, with their bodies and limbs depicted in expertly cut stones, I hated her. She'd shattered my safety. My protector had become a monster. I hated myself for ever having thought her more

than a brute. I even hated my mother, who had wanted me to be better than she was, who'd never declared me, who'd let all this happen.

These giants had taken everything from me, and I had only ever given them all of me. Starting with Hendar, who'd taken me from my pyrrhic sacrifice and put me in a cage. He'd made me feel so glad to be safe. What a coward I'd been! My hands balled up into fists.

Drool built up at the corners of my mouth. I leaned over and spat it out. She didn't even move, her back curved like a hulking mountain lion. There was treachery in that form, a treachery which nothing I did seemed to breach. She'd been for herself from the beginning.

And they'd taken Nevaun. He never should have been on a hunt. I thought of all the suffering I'd taken in over the years. All those dead. From the Yatani of my village to the last batch of thralls I'd sold. All of them spoke to me now, screaming their feelings and their strongest thoughts at me. Accusing me.

I'd been a party to all of this, glad in my power, my position. The medallion sat on my chest, heavy and hated.

The next day, she let the fires in the chamber die down. She no longer bowed down to the massive wood idol. My tongue was a bump of ash in the dying embers.

The power of the place throbbed in my bones, and shadows threatened to rise. I didn't think I could summon blue fire into this chamber, but I wanted to. A thought, a memory, came to me of when I'd been young, in that stone crack awaiting my death.

A thought can kill.

My thought can kill.

Pain rippled through me as I tried to snarl with an empty mouth.

I had made a mistake in helping her, a grave one. My mother would never have made it. Choosing this brute—a sour fire rose in my throat just to think of her—over *my* people. Heat pricked and stung the wound in my mouth. Nausea twisted my gut and bubbled up my throat.

Those Mornae had said they needed me, but I'd chosen another whose feelings, as hateful as they were to me now, I'd thought I understood.

We would both die here, she and I, in this chamber built by more delicate hands, more astute minds. Minds that had traveled the stars, my mother had said. *We are not like other peoples*, she'd reminded me.

That night, the goddess dawned and rolled over the Moon Sea toward Vaidolin. I could not see Syral, but the chamber's glyphs lit up as the goddess dawned. Death and madness were coming for me.

The goddess wrenched the veil of the world back, revealing the guts and sinews of the world beyond. Strands of quivering power twisted before me, sheets and sheets of them flowing through me and over me, all around. I felt as if I would melt into them, lost forever. I set my hands, every bare inch of me, against the *kith* floor and took in her power. Poured into that stone, traveling through it. I was delirious, fever riddled. What else could come of having one's tongue sliced off and a ball of weeds stuffed in its place?

I did not resist the goddess's call and traveled with her through that marvelous city. Thoughts lived in those stones... thousands of years of people who'd touched their hands to the walls. The echoes

of their lives filled me, drew me in, and showed me the secret places. And as I traveled, I learned the boundaries of the city, and where its power ended and Sayin's began.

I coughed, spat out a wad of lumpy saliva and blood, and opened my eyes, glued shut with salty tears. The chamber swam around me. The fire filled the entire room, its light pushing and pulling at the shadows. My head lolled from side to side. Then, I realized *she* was the shadow.

My master was standing toward the opposite corner, hands on her head, grasping her filthy hair, white-knuckled.

My vision settled. She looked broken.

I propped myself up on my elbows. She looked fragile. We could have left days ago. She could have left me, even if only to search for a way out. Better to die trying than rot with that hated effigy, its face never changing.

Yorl's body sat at the hall entrance. She must have dragged him over and kept vermin from feeding on it. There was no way she could haul it out of the pit, and she refused to leave it.

What was she thinking?

My little power refused to answer that question. It had turned as bitter as my mother's. All it wanted was to hurt her, but I knew her plan lay in ruins now. She stood by a wall covered in carvings of Mornae women—priestesses, I guessed—the stones which had formed their heads smashed away. I didn't think it had been Baikal who'd done that, but I blamed them anyway. She pressed her head to the stone, and her fists hammered at the wall. Dust trickled down from the ceiling.

Her god spoke no words to her. Her offering bore no fruit. She'd offered her most precious possession—my power to speak a god-word—and Barka was silent; Aelath mute.

She did not cry out. Or wail. Or weep, sorry for herself. She felt only one thing: rage. Rage at being denied her destiny. It was everything to her. The runes had delivered it straight from the gods. I had *spoken* it.

I could not help but let her emotions enter me, and they mixed with my growing hatred.

The gods had denied me, too. Denied me my own life. My own feelings. My consort. A flood of sadness passed through me. For both of us. For all of us caught in this stream of events since the death of my mother... no, even further back... to Hendar's exile. Or my mother's. My head spun as I tried to find a beginning to the suffering.

I took deep breaths of the dry, warm air, each one scraping my already cracked throat. I squeezed the water from the remaining stalk, wincing at the pain as I swallowed it past the scab of tender flesh.

Her god had not spoken to her, but mine had spoken to me.

I inched my way up the wall to stand, my tears dried, the trails cracking on my skin. My legs shook and trembled as I walked toward her. She turned and glanced at Yorl's hammer by the wall. Her left hand reached to the dagger nestled across her lower back. Her other hand rested along her thick, muscled thigh, groping for the dagger at her calf.

My power erupted, shaking the walls. She didn't seem to care if the city fell on us, but I read her. I knew her so well. She was still thinking, still calculating how to win.

I gurgled a laugh and spat out a wad of bloody saliva. It dribbled down my chin. I heaved, struggling with the pain and the backwash. My eyes stung, trying to cry again. I stopped and wretched, vomiting up a stomach full of red-laced slobber. I straightened and opened my mouth to release the heat that burned my mouth and throat all the way to my gut.

The shadows crept toward her, like grasping hands and claws and the snaking tendrils of nightmarish creatures.

She didn't flinch, though. Fear did not exist for her. She prepared to fight me.

Shame washed over me. What a ridiculous duel this was! I was like an ant she could crush. I knew I looked frightful, like the daemons the Baikal imagined in their dreams. Shadows swelled and poured out from me.

As I neared her, she roared her Baikal fear at me, and my body tingled from head to toe. My bones felt like they would shatter, every inch of me. I knew my end was near, but something in me, deep, ancient, drove me closer to her.

Are you ready to die, my love? Nevaun asked in my mind. I was delirious, and my mind wandered in the blink of an eye down countless pathways of memory. I smiled, blood dribbling out the corners of my mouth.

Take a step toward death, toward the goddess. The words rumbled in my head, long buried bits of wisdom from my people. And now, surrounded by their works, they felt meaningless. I didn't need the goddess to kill me. My assassin was here, she who'd cut out my tongue and filled me with dread since the first day I'd met her.

I'd never wanted to admit it before.

She growled, but there was a tinge of frustration in her voice. Weariness. Why had our goddesses not succeeded? Why had they

failed us both?

Together, we raged for a moment, staring at each other, feet apart. She at the crown of my head, and I at her belly.

We'd have it out here, two daughters of goddesses in a mythic battle.

And yet, she didn't strike. She could have. Instead, she relaxed and held her arms away from her body. We needn't draw a circle. She would not strike back.

"Once, I will allow it," she said, holding her hands back.

She would allow me to strike her, to let out whatever it was in me that smoldered like my sliced tongue on the fire.

I wanted to. Goddess above, I *wanted* to. I croaked. My new laughter—if I'd ever even laughed near her—filled the chamber. The humor of life was a sweet balm to be shared with a loved one... or else a barb, a weapon. My insides turned and bubbled up, my throat burning the wound once again. My fists balled up, so minuscule compared to hers. Her middle rippled with bands of iron muscle, taunting me to strike.

I wanted to hate her. Goddess above, I wanted to hate her more than anything. But it was not my way to think like that.

Time slowed for me. I drifted again. I perceived every inch of her, every hair standing out like it blazed in the sunlight. So alive. I remembered her as she'd been in that crib, and how I'd stroked her hair and whispered to her.

I was responsible for all that happened since the day I'd read the runes, just as my mother had caused the death of my village. I'd shared my thoughts and dreams with my master as she lay in her crib. My little power—treacherous, as my mother had warned me—had led us here. A power too great in the hands of an inexperienced

acolyte. There was nothing worse than an acolyte drunk on watered-down wine.

What good would it have done to strike her? If I hadn't done it before, why now?

The same fate had trapped us. I'd spoken it, and now I had no tongue to recant.

I searched deep inside her, letting that rage wash over me, fighting past the current, letting it become a part of me. The only part of me. I could strike her with her own strength. Somehow, we'd both feel better if I did.

Her fear, her sadness, hid behind that wall of rage. Terrified of the ridicule, all her work at building allies, of letting them grope her, have her, of driving herself to the point of death to prove herself worthy of being the one expected to change everything for her people.

All lost. All because of that stupid heap of flesh at the entrance to the hall.

I sat on the edge of those feelings with the rage at my back. These feelings were her true self. I latched onto those feelings instead, and the shadows receded. She relaxed, confused by my stillness.

I shook my head, turning down the offer. She grunted as I wobbled to the fire and took a piece of charcoal, and then on those sacred stones depicting my people—onyx, silver-streaked granites, and marbles—I drew out in fine black lines the thing my goddess had shown me: the way out.

I made the choked sounds of animals caught in traps, bleating and moaning my explanation with my broken mouth. In that maze of lines, there was an escape for us.

Her shadow loomed over me, and I expected at any moment to die. I didn't know what she was anymore, or who I was.

She grunted once and turned away, gathering her things. She prepared a torch and motioned for me to walk ahead. It was not just us making the escape, though. She took what little rope, scraps, and the harness she'd made for me... anything at all, and she bound it all around her brother and dragged him behind her.

"Lead us," she said.

I nodded weakly. I could see the way in my mind's eye, but carried the torch for her, anyway.

The way was long.

Goddess above, I didn't think either of us would make it. Delirium plagued us both.

"*They* killed him," she said as we walked down a long hallway, the thuds and drags grating on my nerves. "*They* broke the truce." Her voice echoed down the tunnel as if repeating the words made it so. Nothing in all the body was more important to the Baikal than the tongue with which they called upon the gods and spoke the god-words.

Ahead of us, Sayin's light filtered through bushes and branches covering the mouth of the cave. Empty tears pricked my eyes, and I wiped away the grit.

She dragged Yorl's body along with a strength beyond what I'd seen before. Her body strained to its limit. She had a secret fire in her, burning through her with an urgency and purpose that few except legendary figures could have understood.

I pushed through the bushes and covered my blinded eyes—something that had never happened before, having grown up under

Sayin's light. I turned back, and the shadows of the tunnel thickened. One form of power could I use at a time.

Syral pulled her twin's massive body out into the sunlight and covered her nose. The rot would start soon.

We were miles away from the place we'd entered. We needed Eskar. He could bear Yorl more easily.

If Eskar was even there. He might have run off, or worse.

She turned to me. "I will fetch Eskar. Stay with the body. Under the shade there. I will be back by the third hour." She raised her hand to the sky, marking the place.

I nodded as she dragged Yorl under the shade of a small tree—its fine branches fanning out, but empty of leaves. She pointed to a gap in the stone wall, and I pressed myself into it.

"If an animal comes," she said, glaring at me with her dark, piercing eyes, "kill whatever comes for him." She flung a blade into the ground by my feet.

I nodded and accepted the knife, which was like a short blade for me. I had no training as a warrior, but I could try to stab.

Her long strides carried her from my view. A shell of dark surrounded me. I covered my face with my tattered hood, because of Yorl's smell and the fear that came over me.

Alone. To sit vigil over a corpse.

How I *hated* him.

A pack of beasts stared at me from the edge of the Moon Sea where the grasses broke free of the stone river. Their eyes shone in the starlight. I pointed the dagger at them.

Not that they would find me. I hid in a waving shell of shadow like the one I'd seen my mother make, and the one I'd made when my master had struck me. Like the one that rose any time she neared me now.

The third hour was long past.

Yorl's body lay on the stone like an offering for the beasts. Hundreds of pounds of stinking flesh. It called far and wide to every predator willing to eat its fetid meat.

A single animal bite would taint him, forbidding his place among the ancestors and riding the waves with the sea god. Broken and stabbed already, Yorl's wounds were acceptable to the Baikal as signs of battle. But I had no strength to argue the merits of my master's plan, and I had no voice. I could only act, the most divine thing I could do now.

Bodies low and slinking, like a wolf but with movements like a snow lion's, the beasts crept closer. Six, at first, formed a semi-circle enclosing the cave mouth.

My mother had taught me how to tell if the goddess favored a beast, but now, all I could think of was to hold the knife out. They must be of the Dark, as they moved in and out of shadows, their forms appearing and disappearing in a shimmering wave of form and color. Either way, I would die—in the maw of a beast or at the hands of my master for not defending Yorl.

At least my master would give me a proper funeral.

I hoped she would.

The beasts inched closer, paws stepping on the stones like cushions. They sniffed the air and sprinted across the stone river.

They didn't have long snouts like a wolf, but broad smiling maws with pointed teeth. Their shoulders sloped from their broad chests. Dark shadows, trapped spots of midnight, speckled their fur. Their fangs were black, only turning white toward the back of their mouths. A sickening feeling came over me, and my bones burned again. The shell thickened so much that I could see only a faint outline of them. My nose bled, and the beasts howled with laughter.

They prowled toward me and then started hopping in place, snarling and snapping, calling me out. I pressed myself deeper into the crevice. My throat gurgled a wad of saliva and the beast yipped.

Let them have Yorl. I could run after they'd consumed him.

She would think they'd eaten me.

And yet, a sliver of hope remained for our fate's fulfillment. My destiny, as hers, was bound up with Yorl's stinking corpse. The thought rankled my gut, my pride. And yet... and yet...

Trembling, I stepped out from the crevice, a shadow within the shadow of night, impenetrable.

"Your goddess must wait," she'd once said.

Until now, I thought. This was the time to call blue fire, to make known the power of my goddess. I recalled my mother and the

terrible wind and light, the way it had sucked up all the air and then roared forth. The way it had consumed the giant-man's flesh and turned him to fine powder, bones and all.

I didn't know how to summon the fire. Mother had never spoken of how to pull the first thread—or even which thread—to draw it out.

The beasts pounded the ground with their front paws, dancing about as I stood by Yorl.

The world changed around me, its secret fabric becoming visible to my mind's eye—thousands upon thousands of humming threads, the secret nature of all things visible to me. And they called to me, urging me to lose myself in them... forever.

This was the priestess's trial. To see power, and return.

The beasts were a complex thrum of millions of threads, all balled up tight, inscrutable. But calling to me in the rock and in the sky, in broad, infinite strokes, were the goddess's own threads. I saw them spanning the world and piercing the earth where the blackrock ran like veins. They spread across the sky, searching for her, calling to her, and went beyond to the deepest dark of the night sky. They ran beyond the stars and through them. Through me.

One beast snapped at me and buffeted the shell. I shuffled against Yorl and sat on him to regain my balance. Again, the beast snapped, and my knife arced toward it, grazing its snout. It screeched and howled, and its companions did the same, as if they all complained to me at once.

Just give us a taste, they seemed to say.

I felt another's breath behind me, hot and loud as if in my ear. These beasts knew the Dark, a part of their nature, and so the shell amplified their movements to me. I couldn't tell how or why. Do I know how and why I breathe or see or move in the world? That is how favor is, in beast, man, or rock.

I swung out again and cut its ear. The screaming increased. They got closer, scratching at the stony riverbed, maws snapping. One leapt forward and grabbed hold of the cloak we'd used to wrap Yorl. Without a thought, I rushed to it and swung at its head, but it was ready for me and released the cloak, lunging at me with a maw of black and yellow teeth.

It struck the shell, and my arms flailed as I rolled backward over Yorl's body. The knife skittered on the stones, free from my sweaty grip.

That was it. They would have their taste.

They howled, bouncing on their front paws, the shadows in their fur fading as they prepared to leave the Dark and consume their prey.

Yorl offered me nothing but a huge, tangled mess of cloak and muscle, frozen stiff.

My shell wavered, cracking. The beasts exhausted me with their howling cries. No help came for me; not from the cave, from which I'd hoped my people would appear and rescue me. That was a happy little dream—the kind which does not last long in this world.

I reached for a stick, a crooked branch, and waved it at them, all the while looking for the blade.

My chest thumped. The ground thumped.

A loud neighing broke the beasts' concentration on me. They snickered and growled to the north. Blue lights flickered in the night. My master slipped from Eskar's back and kept running toward the beasts, hammer in hand. The beasts chattered, looking to their leader, and then scattered as her hammer knocked one of them clean off its feet. It splattered against the tumbled stone framing the cave mouth. A loud torrent of air blasted toward them from her outstretched hand. They lost their footing and tumbled away.

Half their numbers hid in the stalks, though. They came at her from behind, snapping and snarling. One got hold of her calf, a thick meaty chunk for its wide maw. She half-roared and half-cried. Even she could not bear such pain in silence.

I scrambled for the knife.

The other beasts had recovered and come for her, their fur all shadow now, their movements like the night sky skittering across the gray stone.

She swung that massive hammer, crackling with the power of the Sons of the Sea and the globes blinding bright. Grunts. Snarls. Crunching bones. Bloodcurdling squeals. I closed my eyes and tried to drown out the sounds. Her body throbbed with exhilarating weariness and pain.

Again, the hammer swung, and I felt the power in her limbs as if they were my own. I crept along on all fours, searching for the knife even as the sounds and feelings overwhelmed me. Each of her steps shuddered the earth.

The beasts would not give up. They didn't seem to care if one or two or a dozen of them died, just so long as one of them ate at the end. More of them must be in those swaying grass stalks. Their females with pups. To Syral, they were as annoying as wide-mouthed rats picking over a carcass. She smashed them as they came at her, but they took their tastes with Dark-bound teeth. Bites and scratches covered her body.

She reached up to the sky, head turned up, and called with a loud voice upon her gods. The sky crackled, and threads of power quivered in response. She, too, was a priestess of sorts, the daughter of Barka and Aelath. The sky cracked and thundered, terrifying to behold, but nothing came forth. The beasts howled with

laughter. They lunged, their mouths clamping down on her. They climbed up her like a hill.

If she failed, I would die next.

So close to a Mornae city, the Dark threads tangled with the threads of her gods. I tried to unravel them, plucking and pulling at them with my fingers like they were bad stitches. The rock shuddered, grinding like at the goddess's passing. This was not a hum, but a roar and a rush of air. I pulled at them with my will, with the memory of my mother's serene anger.

Shadows gathered above us. Shadows and storm clouds. Huge tongues of fire wrapped their bodies.

I swallowed a glob of blood. The flames grew. A torrent. A flood of fire.

Here, at last, my mother's vengeance, and that of my house, upon those that had destroyed it. All her bitterness swelled in that fire.

I tried to speak, but only snorts and grunts burst from my broken mouth. My entire body wanted to speak, to roar in defiance.

My master fell to one knee. The bite of these beasts had a sickness in it, and the scratches were burning her flesh. The beasts clambered over her, trying to tear her tough skin and feast on her. They were oblivious to the terror gathering above them.

Do it, I felt her say. Her broken fingers throbbed around the hammer's haft and cracked ribs stabbed at her lungs. More of the beasts appeared now. There had been dozens hiding. I took in her pain, her struggles all coming to nothing, here at the doorstep of her ancestor's tomb.

And what of my great vengeance? I had felt none for myself. For my mother, for Hendar, for Nevaun, for my master's thralls, for

everyone *but* myself. I felt for my master and her great destiny. It consumed me as it did her.

The sky above her swelled with clouds of blue flame and billowing white smoke. I raised both hands and commanded the clouds to release their power.

Blue fire rained down in a circle around my master.

I had performed a thing which should not have been possible, but I understood now how my mother had done it. She'd used Barka's power, summoned by the Baikal shamans, using it to latch on to her own, deeper power. *A ladder*, as Nevaun had said. This simpler, more primeval power had been a stepping stone to the deeper one, a shortcut through the winding Dark.

The Dark quavered and quivered in tune with it, and when the fire came, it came crackling and roaring with the voices of Barka and Aelath.

She'd taken my tongue, as the Baikal had taken my mother from me, but I would make my own way. I would not let her die. I would not let something so *glorious* die. The oracle must play out.

I made it so.

I mouthed her name to the roaring power of our gods, reminding them of the fate I'd uttered. I was a priestess to all of them. The blue fire raged around Syral. The flames licked across the stone like waves radiating out and away from her. It raged uncontrolled, consuming everything and causing the tall grass to sizzle and pop. But I could not burn her; it would be like burning myself.

Like that night in Hendar's hut, reading the bones, I had her fate in my hands. I spoke the god-word with my fire. She would not die tonight.

The fire consumed a vast number of the beasts. Their remains dotted the stone river in black, smoldering mounds. I stuttered

forward and collapsed to my knees. I weighed a thousand pounds. The blackrock deep in the earth drew me to itself. The flames continued fanning out and away from us, diminishing with each flicker. I couldn't control it except to send it away. It would die in the quenching waters of the Moon Sea.

Her body ravaged, Syral rose. In the distance, the remaining beasts, flames licking their fur still, continued their cries, screaming and fleeing through the stalks.

She turned to me, trying to understand what had happened. I shouldn't have been able to do that, my tongue gone. Her eyes narrowed on me, calculating her next move. She came toward me, each footfall a rumble in the earth. Her hand twisted the hammer's haft, her knuckles bloody in the starlight. The globes flickered, spent of power, just like me, but I knew her arms were strong enough to swing that hammer one more time.

The shadows tried to rise around me, the whorls of Dark creeping about my feet like the goddess-fire over the stone river.

I set the knife down, but I did not drop my head. My mother's pride welled up in me. I was the last of my house, the last of a great bloodline. I was a matron before all else. Had I had the strength, I would have stood. I did the best I could.

Cool air rushed over me as she passed me in a thundering of determined steps.

She collapsed on Yorl's body, embracing it. Her hope, her destiny, was still a possibility. None would celebrate her for bringing home a half-chewed body, but now her story had grown. It was taking shape in her mind: how she'd defeated the pack of devil dogs, the hounds of the sleeping god.

She turned to me then, eyes ringed in black. She didn't need to speak. Neither of us did now. I swallowed again. The pain rippled

through me, the stinging grating on my mind. I fetched the salves I kept in oilskins within my satchel. A crush of medicinal herbs, ready for use. I lacked bandages enough for her girth, but I just needed to staunch the bleeding and combat the foulness in the beast's bite.

I ran to the edge of the Moon Sea and chopped down stalks with her knife. Cutting them open, I cleansed her wounds with their water. The stalks had power of their own, so I smeared their soft flesh on the cuts. The beast's teeth had sunk into her calf, tearing at her muscle as its mouth had tried to clamp shut. I dabbed the grime and blood away and then applied the salve. All the while, I felt her gaze on me. What could she say? She could never thank me, never acknowledge that she had *relied* on me.

"Eskar is around the rocks there. Fetch him?" she asked.

I left her, but grabbed the knife, securing it in my belt. My body still trembled, but no longer with fear. Hope drove me to do what she'd asked of me. The feeling of her joy that the body was still intact, that her destiny awaited her, strengthened me.

A bramble had trapped Eskar's lead. He pawed the earth with his massive hoof, the whites of his eyes stark against the night sky. I held out my hands and made what gentle noises I could. It was like I was singing a broken lullaby. He snorted at me, but let me take the lead.

When I returned, Syral was chewing on the stalks, regaining her strength with each bite. She then bound Yorl up more tightly.

"We need to leave," she said.

I nodded and urged Eskar alongside Yorl's body.

I was empty, a husk, but I was determined to see it through.

She'd a plan, and I had to be there to fulfill it.

Sayin crossed the sky in a low arc, and we cast long shadows. Heavy clouds covered the northeast. We'd come to the tomb city from the east by a path full of crevices and ridges, stone and trees, and now returned by the direct path. These were the flatlands, lakes of yellow grass with occasional ripples of gray where the ground wrinkled. Specks would appear on the horizon and bolt. Elk, most likely. She didn't attempt to hunt them. We couldn't waste any time. Yorl had his say even in death.

So, we ate stalks.

We walked back in silence. Syral led Eskar, and I shambled behind them both. Shadow fiends could have eaten me, and she wouldn't have noticed. I resisted hating her for her ingratitude. She was what she always was. It would be foolish for me to expect otherwise. I was her tool, her relic. Only one thing mattered for both of us, and it lay ahead.

We stopped for Eskar. He needed care. The flatlands were not a good place for him. He complained of the shrubs and poor grasses, pawing and kicking at them. We carried extra stalks for him, but he longed to be in the high valleys with his herd.

I was glad for him, though, because otherwise I would have died on that walk. Early on, I stumbled often, fainted even, and when I came to, I did not see them. It was only because of Eskar that I caught up to them. I'd stumble into the camp and realize she was oblivious to my absence. She sat facing the direction of Rothmin's Stead in silence. I had to be ready to move, even before the sun rose.

A trail led us from sacred site to sacred site. Sacred stones rose from the earth, but they were blanched white, not like *kith* at all. Smooth from millennia of rain and wind, whatever symbols may have once been carved on their faces were now illegible.

The shamans that tended the fires at the sacred stones moved away when they saw us. They huddled together at a distance, their ancient bodies rattling along with their charm sticks like they were seeing ghosts. They didn't balk when we ravaged their stores like bears. That's what they were there for. But they didn't like what we were hauling. A dead man returning from the tombs had to be the greatest of ill omens.

And Syral was terrifying to behold. Blood and grime covered her still. She was gaunt, but fierce. None dared hiss or rattle a charm at her. She was a living god-word. They covered their heads and looked away.

The smell challenged us most. Whenever I could, I ran off the path and pulled up fragrant grasses and branches of sage and other shrubs to stuff under the cloak covering Yorl's body. I walked upwind from him as much as I could, but otherwise covered my face with what remained of my cloak.

The goddess dawned on us once more. She moved more westerly in winter, off her regular path, and heavy cloud cover pushed south. The north would not see her for months. Still, I

relished what little I saw of her. A brilliant haze to the west, I found strength in her.

We stopped at a pond near the final standing stones. Syral crouched down and swept her hand through the still water. She did not bathe, though. She wanted the Baikal to see the toil of her journey. The wounds made by the shadow beasts still bubbled with fever, swollen and red, but they would pass—such is the Baikal body. The wounds made by the Mornae's slugs were still red, but the skin was closing.

I waited a distance away from her, Eskar's reins in hand. I restrained my gift and gave her privacy.

She passed water over her hands, speaking words I could not hear. She must be speaking to her mother goddess, the air and sky, or her father god, the sea. This went on for an hour, at least. I waited, only washing myself when she finished. I didn't know if she meant for me to look just as ragged, but either way, she gave me no orders or commands. We just knew what each needed to do.

I changed out the sage and whisperbuds battling Yorl's stench.

We moved on again, even through the night. We were within striking distance now of Rothmin's Stead. Winter had settled on Zelaugr territory, the trees throwing their leaves and the ironwoods already dusted with snow.

And the shamans had doubtless sent word already, either by man, beast, or vine. She did not wait to gather her strength again, as she could not wait. She had one more weapon to use.

Gullies of frost-covered muck, smoldering fire pits, pens of dying thralls, and longhouses packed with Veikal welcomed us home. She didn't avoid the sprawling villages of the Flats this time. As we entered the steads, folk roused to watch us pass by.

I walked closer to Eskar, covering my face. Fortunately, the chill had dampened Yorl's smell.

Those who admired Syral called to her and ran after us, forming a train. Most just stared, grim-eyed.

We pressed on.

It was Womtha who met us first, a joy on his white face like the joy of his first night with her. He'd braided his snow-white hair, and his beard tinkled with charms made by his new mate. Black symbols covered him. He'd dressed in battle gear. "Timoth is gathering the clan."

"Good," she said. "Walk with us."

He grinned, his hammer bouncing in his hand. He stood at her shoulder. Soon, Tonn and Malgog appeared and flanked us, as well as Timoth's people.

They adjusted their gait to my strides. It slowed us, but no one complained.

For the first time, I felt like a member of Syral's clan, not a thrall or relic. Their tall shapes blotted out the sky. Their fists moved back and forth like branches in the wind, comforting me. I was home. This was all I knew.

The climb up into the chief's stead proved more arduous. Eskar snuffled and whinnied, but even he seemed determined not to disappoint her—any other day but this one. The men pushed on his rump and kept the corpse stead on his back.

From the porch of our stead, Chana and Noreh, and the rest of my people, watched us arrive. Fain stood beside them, hammer in hand. I loved him for watching over them. When I looked back, they'd gone. No doubt to prepare for our arrival.

We made our way up through the silent village. Winter had come early, and a carpet of dead leaves rustled at our feet, but in the distance, the mighty ironwoods rose stalwart against a row of dark gray peaks. A line of Trosgan's warriors stood at the entrance to the chief's yard. They stepped aside, weapons sideways across their hips. For now, they were undecided, and so they let us enter unmolested.

The yard was full already. Word had traveled quickly.

"My son!" the old chief cried from the rise-hut's porch.

His women propped up his long scrap of a body. His beard had turned gray and thin. When death came for a Baikal, it came as a violent tide, and his time had come. He whimpered to see his pride, his precious hope, draped over Eskar like a dead stag. His women helped him forward, stumbling and shambling toward Yorl's body.

Syral ignored him and walked past. Eskar followed her, not even acknowledging him.

Trosgan grasped at Yorl's bound corpse, pulling at the ties. Dried leaves and flowers and scraps of cloth fell away to the yard's hard

ground. The cloak covering Yorl's face fell away, and the crowd gasped. Having a dead man in one's house—one who was dead like Yorl—invited evil spirits.

The crowd murmured, and a rage rose over the fact that someone had done a double evil to him. Not just that someone had killed him in a sacred place, but that someone had dared carry him back like a dead animal. They quieted as Syral stopped at the steps to the rise-hut. Shadows swirling at my feet, I took my place beside her. I was ready to defend us should anyone disagree with her. My goddess could finally speak, and from then on, she would.

"My brother has returned to us." Syral said it as sure and strong as her father had bellowed orders in the past, but her fear-voice came like a firm wind which bore within it the threat of a northern gale. "No one can say otherwise."

The village seemed as silent as the tomb we'd left. A sheath of shadow covered me like a second skin and dampened all sounds, but their intentions sounded like ringing bells to me. I'd lost the power of speech, but my little gift was stronger than ever.

The gathered Baikal stared hard at the bulk draped on Eskar's back.

"Build a pyre!" the chief squealed with anguish. His arms stretched out to his daughter. "Do not offend the gods! Burn him! Burn him!"

He grabbed her arm, but she wrenched it away.

"Give me some of his bones!" He shrieked and howled. "I will take him back! Scornful woman! He must rest with his ancestors!" He whirled about, calling again for the pyre.

She ignored him and spoke to the crowd. "There will be no pyre today unless it is yours, old man."

He recoiled from her. I looked away with embarrassment for the giant he'd once been.

Chana and Noreh appeared at my side, faces drawn and tear stained. Hands clasped to their chests, they refrained from touching me, and I refrained from acknowledging them. I stood above them, not slouching to make them feel less small, but tall so that all could see me. My stern gaze scanned the crowd. Blood-stained rags covered me, but I was a high priestess of the Dark Goddess.

Tonn and Malgog unburdened Eskar. Sprigs of sweet-smelling grasses and dew leaves fell away as they dragged the body down and across the yard toward the rise-hut. Noses crinkled as the body passed.

I touched Chana and pressed my thoughts to her mind through the maze of her body's feelings and sensations. Wide-eyed, she nodded. She'd heard me as if I'd spoken words to her with my mouth. She grabbed Noreh and whispered my command. They ran off, one to Syral's hut and the other to Yorl's steward. All that belonged to Yorl was Syral's now, or would be. I signaled to Timoth that he should guard them. He sent two of his household with each of them.

Those of the hill, forest, and beast made their way through the crowd to the rise-hut's porch.

"What is this, Daughter of Aelath?" Rigid asked. "What manner of omen is this?" He climbed the porch steps and stood at the entrance to the rise, its keeper. He glared at the chief, who had plainly abdicated in Rigid's mind. Trosgan blubbered and sobbed with his women in the center of the yard. He could no longer rule the Baikal.

"I have brought Yorl back from the dead," Syral said.

Rigid turned to me, squinting. "He *is* dead."

Rigir had come prepared though, bearing the regalia of his office. He bristled as my power plunged into him, but he only coughed and winced as I braced his skull. Was this what he'd expected from the beginning? For me to dominate them into unity?

"*Quite* dead," he said. His shoulders scrunched up, and he shook his head at me. I relented.

"And?" Syral asked, drawing his attention back to her.

One of Melka's shamans whispered to him. I plundered the shamans' mind. With the accuracy of a master archer, I entered and found what I wanted.

"Perhaps his spirit lingers, elder?" the shaman of Melka said more loudly. "Yes, his spirit lingers. I see it." The shamans agreed, rattling their sticks and muttering their god-words. They wanted my master to lead, and if they had to revise the oracle to allow it, they would. They declared Yorl still present—not alive, but also not dead.

It was nonsense, but nonsense can have power when directed by powerful minds over weak ones.

Rigir hesitated and looked at me. I gave him the smallest nod.

"And so..." he said, reading our faces. "And so... he should sit the rise?"

"Isn't that what fate decrees?" Syral asked.

Rigir glanced about and rattled his staff so the carved bones danced. He muttered something to the sky and nodded. He turned to the crowd and made the face. The other shamans made their faces and struck their poses, clear for all to see. There was no other interpretation possible.

The gods had decided that Yorl was indeed still present with them, and the crowd exhaled as one.

Syral entered the rise-hut with Yorl carried in on a seat of arms. Like a great chief, indeed. I couldn't help smirking like Nevaun would

have.

I waited on the porch and waved my arm for the crowd to make way—and they did. Something must have changed in me because they did it without hesitation. There was a terror in their eyes. I didn't care.

Chana and Noreh appeared with the things I'd asked for: the twins' finery. They followed me in, despite Rigid's frowns. Tradition didn't permit thralls to enter the rise-hut, but on this day, he'd set tradition aside.

Womtha and Fain were unwrapping Yorl. I motioned for Yorl's thralls to help them, and for Timoth and his men to guard the rise.

Chana and Noreh handed Syral the fur cape made of a dozen gray wolf pelts. It was the finest thing any Baikal had ever worn. And then they handed over a silver torc, carved with the symbols of all the peoples of Vailassa, each tip with the symbols of our goddesses. Despite the blood and grime, she draped herself in the wealth she'd accumulated over the years. Her cuts and wounds were still red and swollen, blistering with pus. I'd done my best to close the serious ones, but she'd refused more care. She wanted everyone to see her this way.

While she put on her treasures, Fain and Womtha pressed Yorl's stiff body into a seated position on the rise. Bones cracked and popped as they forced the corpse to sit. They wrapped his bear cloak around his shoulders and draped his neck with his silver chains and the black fangs of their tribal totem. They rammed his wealth of gem rings, bracers, and bands onto his bloated arms and hands. His corpse sat in the rise's center, in the place of honor, with his hammer between his legs, the head leaning against his chest, his huge hands forced around the haft.

Rigir set a crown of young ironwood vines on Yorl's black hair. He mumbled something to one of his brethren, who fumbled about in his satchel. He handed Rigir a clay jar of pine sap. Rigir used a dollop for each eyelid, propping Yorl's eyes open so that the milky blue could gaze on his people.

Syral stood before her twin, the smallest smile on her lips.

I touched Chana, and she took Noreh out of the rise-hut. Whatever might happen next, I wanted them safe.

Tonn and Malgog took their places at either side of me, Syral's weapons in hand.

When those present had hushed, Syral said, "I call a moot of all the tribes. Call those of sea, forest, and beast. All of the gods must speak."

She glanced at me and motioned for me to go first.

Without a tongue, unable to speak, I gave the pose. And in case there was any doubt of my power, I called the goddess. The crack startled everyone, and even the Baikal cowered. The earth beneath them groaned. Shadows welled around me. I lowered my hands and tried to hum with the echo. I swallowed the wad of saliva building in my mouth.

Syral raised her hand and wind whipped about it, racing through the high ceiling of the rise-hut. She left Barka's word to Rigir.

He smiled and nodded to her. "Hill and forest are present... Great Chief."

Globes draped about his chest and waist burst to life, and Barka's power crackled above him. The shaman of Melka, a small shrub of a giant, rattled his stick, and the leaves adorning him bristled in an unseen wind. Vines crept about him like they were living.

Horns sounded outside to summon the tribes.

Syral sat down beside her brother.

We waited as the rise-hut filled with the most important from every tribe of the Baikal. From their garb, it was clear they'd come prepared for something momentous.

Even Talkun entered, unwilling to give up his seat to another. He'd bedecked himself in the signs of his tribe, marking his body with symbols written in black. His eyes were two wells of darkness where boar tusks covered the side of his face. He snorted and took his place, arms crossed in defiance.

Trosgan would not go peacefully to his ancestors, though. He stumbled through the crowd, but none would help him until he fell forward, a wreck of an old man. His women, just two now, helped him to his feet. They glared at me with hatred, but I dismissed them with a turn of my head toward Syral.

But something caught my eye.

I stepped forward then, because he'd a blade palmed in his hand, and I read his heart.

An urge rose in me—I knew it was Syral's—to crush him, to snap my fingers and break his mind like my mother might have. To call down blue fire. To pummel him to the ground with shadow.

But Syral snorted, half-laughing at the sad sight of him threatening her with a meager knife.

I knew what he intended. He intended to accuse her, despite all the support of the gods. All he had to do was plant the seed of doubt in them, and dissent would fester from the first day of her rule onward. Support for Trosgan was still strong. They longed for the early days of his youth. He would accuse her of killing Yorl, and of using me to do it. It would be so easy.

My fist curled. *Fire! Let him burn in fire once and for all.* Rage swelled in me that this wretch, this man who'd put fear in me, who'd

forced us through so much ugliness, should dare ruin it all with lies.

She stopped me with a raised finger. I flushed hard, aware of the anger that had threatened to consume me. Her chuckle disconcerted him. The knife shook in his hand. He'd wanted to point it at me.

She patted Yorl's knee. "I will tell you of how the gods blessed my brother. Of his valiant war against the shadows. How the gods favored him to the end."

Trosgan's eyes widened. She'd learned from him well, and would weave a story worthy of legend.

"My brother fought with the fury of the sea." She reached over and uncovered the gaping wound crossing Yorl's side and gut. "You see here where a blacksteel spear wielded by a daemon pierced him. Not one daemon, but three. Each made of shadow. In chambers made by the Dark Goddess, under starlight, he fought them."

Their eyes were wide. None could deny it. No other weapon could have pierced Yorl. They'd seen his contests, his feats of strength, and his resistance to wounding. They knew common weapons would have slid right off his iron-hide skin.

"So I took his hammer. Assassins awaited me in shadowed halls, but I dispatched them to save my brother."

Talkun shifted, expecting an accusation, but none came.

"Lies! Lies!" the chief said. "What word did the god speak?"

"I alone entered the sea, old man. I entered it. And only I returned to the cliff side."

His face fell, defeated. Yorl had not reached the sacred place. He'd not even known about it.

She continued her story. "And then, in the pit of the Dark Goddess's abode, I slew ten of the daemons."

I gave no sign it was a lie, though everyone looked askance at me. I remained with my hands in the pose, assenting to whatever

story she wished to tell. Truth didn't matter now.

"And then, after I'd carried him out, the devil dogs attacked."

She twisted her leg out so they could see the throbbing bite. The mark of where the beast's maw had clamped down on her was as wide as her hand.

The crowd pressed closer. She showed them other wounds along her legs and arms. The pellet wounds on her belly and chest.

"How many were there, Aelaku?" someone asked from the crowd.

"Hundreds."

They all nodded, craving more of the heroic tale. Craving for her to lead them.

"A field of death is all that remained after the battle."

It amazed them, as she'd hoped. They murmured the words *Aelaku* and *Aela* as if the goddess herself were present.

"The gods were with me then as I defended his body," she said. "The heavens rained down lightning and fire."

They took no issue with my goddess's power creating that field of death. I was Syral's thrall, her weapon. In their minds, she wielded me as surely as her hammer.

By now, more shamans had arrived, and they were eager to be united with such power. They arrayed themselves to the sides of the rise, even the southern ones with their strange gods. For once, there was a single person they could unite around. They'd never know what had truly happened. They knew how these stories worked.

Legend. Myth. It would all serve her.

I glanced at her. It didn't matter how it had happened or what my role had been. We knew the truth. We'd build a wall of lies together to build a better future.

Rigir gave me a small nod, his eyes blazing with the power of Barka.

And so, my master began her rule as chief of the Zelaugr. But she had greater ambitions. In that regard, she was like her father.

“From this day on, only true Sons of the Sea and Daughters of Aelath will sit the moot.”

She tore her globes off and cast them upon the ground. Yanking Yorl’s hammer free—his head fell forward to his chest—she crushed them with a single blow. Her fists tightened. She snorted and brought forth power without the globes. She glowed for an instant.

Rigir’s brow arched, and then he, too, ripped off his globes and cast them upon the ground, stamping on them with the butt of his staff. A gentle crackle of light surrounded him.

Baikal looked on in dismay.

Talkun’s brow smoothed. He rose and motioned for silence.

“Aelaku,” he said gruffly, “the Black Boar honor you. Long have we waited for your return.” Tearing off his strings of globes, he crushed them with his massive, iron-soled boots. He raised his fist and blue light crackled through it. His arm trembled from the effort, and he let out a deep gasp.

“I welcome the Black Boar,” she said. “May they all prove to be Sons of the Sea, as Talkun has.”

She didn’t wait for others to commit to her edict. There’d be time. She didn’t want them humiliated. Talkun’s effort had been considerable for even that small display. It was an auspicious beginning to her rule.

She held up her right hand, fingers spread wide, and said, “Five daughters will I have. Let the greatest of the Sons of the Sea come to me and see if I find pleasure with him. But,” she gripped Yorl’s stiff thigh, “we are chief of chiefs. And none other.”

She leaned back and waited for them to settle.

“Each tribe, each clan, will rule itself first. My hammer will fall on those that do not. See to your own troubles. Do not trouble me. For a word burns within me, the lightning strike of fate. I will lead us to a place we did not think we could reach. Barka and Aelath and all of the gods will walk this land again.”

The Daughter of Aelath did not just summon wind, but spoke on it, and as soft as the softest whisper, it reached my mind. But I knew it was more than that. There was an understanding there. It was as if she had taken on my gift, my talent for knowing feelings and thoughts, but she only knew mine. It had been this way since the first day we'd met. How she had survived so much, how she had known which moves to make, which of Yorl's rivals to bed.

As truth dawned on me, she spoke to me without words, as Hendar had once done. Her lips did not move. She had learned better than he had.

Know their hearts. I would know who is not true.

Her lips pursed. Her eyes narrowed.

I knew then that the bones had spoken true. Despite the horror of losing my tongue, I could not help but see the truth of it all. That I was an instrument of her rise to power, and she of mine. She had needed me all along; she had *relied* on me, even though I hadn't known it. I'd been open to her since the first time we'd met.

She asked me to subdue them all, and I did so, insinuating myself into their minds and urging them to put away their rage and think otherwise. With no tongue, my only words were those of thought; minds and bodies were my battlefield.

Within a day, everyone spoke of the new chieftain, Daughter of Sea and Sky, who had rescued her brother from the daemon pit, with her captive in tow, a priestess of the Dark Goddess. The story grew until the tribes pledged to her, and together they'd step across the truce boundary, making war on the Mornae.

And I—a thrall, a mere acolyte, a houseless matron, and an exile—had shaped all of this.

What followed, I have told before. I have recounted the battles, the hunts in lands long forgotten, and the great revival of the Baikal. These are tales worthy of legend, if not for the truth of how they came to be. There was little that was legendary about them but for the constant striving. At last, my mother would agree with me. I'd recovered my Mornae heritage, but I was not yet complete.

Syral became *Mother of Many*, seeding the strongest tribes with the gift of her body. She bore daughters like she waged war: strategically. One of the green-eyed men came, and she listened to his advice on which mates would serve her best. She selected whom she willed. In the end, her judgments were sound. Every suitable match of her progeny rebalanced the Baikal in favor of Aelath. Five girls, as she'd promised; an auspicious and divine number. Perfect specimens. And from them, grandchildren to seed every tribe from the Wilderlands to the border of Ahzhal.

Despite her daughters' perfection, she lost not a jot of her power. With each birth, she seemed to become more than she'd ever been. I marveled at this. Mornae women had a dissimilar experience unless they lived for cycles. Few did. Most could not or would not wait to replenish their strength. And so, the aging set in.

Syral proved a good chieftain, according to their ways—never callous or petty; fair to all who were loyal, and ruthless to those who overstepped her bounds. She took on all challengers, but there were few. She honored the gods. Unlike her father, she never sat the rise to stagnate until death. She'd never yearned to sit it for its own sake. Warring and hunting kept her limbs as strong as when she'd been young.

Even greater than being a good chief or giving the Baikal daughters again, she became a beacon to all. A bright, burning flame at the summit of the highest peak, calling them upward.

She saw a path forward—the only one there'd ever been—for the Baikal. Hers was always the first step. The weight of the god's power rested first upon her shoulders, and only then did she demand it of her followers. She'd not lord it over others, but urge them to rise to the challenge. They'd either follow her, or they wouldn't. She lauded those who could summon or hold god-power without the aid of southern globes. Instead, the shamans made their own charms and magics to aid their warriors. They again practiced ancient truths. This pleased those of hill, forest, beast, and all the rest.

She changed what she didn't like by her example, and Baikal followed her. They discovered their power again. It was closer than Trosgan believed, but it wasn't a simple journey. As expected, dozens died. Power can be a plague.

The title she favored most was Wind of the Baikal. She blew deep into the lands of Vailassa, even challenging the south and west valleys of Vaidolin, something that had not happened since the earliest days of the crater's occupation by the Mornae. She crafted the Baikal into a focused rage and gave them the pride they'd lacked. She restored the old lineages, the old names, and their

ancestral territories. Each tribe and clan purged its dross. Only the true Baikal survived.

And, for a time, daughters of Aelath were born to them, and sons fifteen feet tall. For a time. As my friends had told me, each generation must care for its god-favor. It was so easy to turn away from the hard path.

One time, crossing a stream, I noticed it sparkled. Someone had thrown away their southern gems, cut and polished or masses of crusted stone. Empty of power. I suspected—knowing the hearts of these people so well—that one day someone would pick them back up and consider themselves rich.

Syral and I accomplished much together. I was ever at her side as she conquered and united. I was always there, her own god-voice. The secret knowledge she gained through me always proved to be her greatest asset, more certain than any trinket or relic crafted by a sorcerer. I mollified hundreds, the masses, with her vision for their future. Even her own children fell under our enchantment.

But even with the gods aligned in her favor, some Baikal refused her rule. These, she crushed. I cannot say whether it was right or wrong to have done this. All I know is that where she ruled, there was a kind of peace. Who can say where true peace begins or ends?

I count her a hero, for what it's worth. I've never known another like her.

My people may consider the Baikal to be without grand ambition. Who's to say her short rule was not great because it was brief? My people fell, brittle and weak, from the heights of fifteen thousand years—and before that, long cycles within the Golden Empire. Seldom did any of my kind achieve so much in so little time. Even

Savra took hundreds of years to reach the crater and unite those who followed her into a common purpose.

A day is like a thousand years, a thousand years like the blink of an eye, so my mother recited daily. *Always look ahead. Look back only to learn the way forward. The present is the place you set out from.* It was only later in life that I remembered more about my mother. Perhaps because I had responsibilities, duties... I was no longer a flustered acolyte.

I justify Syral to justify myself and the role I played in her rise.

It was fate.

I wore her medallion and never forgot what I was. This helped me to the last. I never gave her reason to suspect me, and I never acted against her. My mind and heart were open to her.

Her enemies tried to take my life.

That is a story for another time.

She never caused me pain like that again. There was never affection between us, only respect. Though I was her tool, her weapon, she never asked for the blue fire, the shadows, or my more terrifying gifts again. She wanted my quiet powers, the deep and still ones that knew every feeling down to the chill creeping along a person's spine, or the hairs standing on end because a lie had been told.

In the end, however, death comes for the great as for the small, and sometimes those that burn more brightly fade more quickly. She'd done all she wanted. Her power filled the lands ruled by the Baikal. While she was strong, she never let it die. She forced her body to stay strong, lovely to their eyes, for as long as she could.

I was just a beginner still, at the cusp of my life as a priestess. My hundredth year approached. I recalled my eighth birthday coming only days before the giants would come and take my mother from

me. My mother had spoken of my naming and how important it was. Soon, I'd reach another milestone as a captive priestess. I was a relic to be handed down.

But which daughter would Syral choose to inherit me?

When Syral noted a weakness in herself—one her pride couldn't bear—she began taking the *sadu* leaf. It seized her, deep within, giving no outward sign. She remained, to all appearances, as glorious as on the first day she'd claimed the rise. She burned too hot to descend gently to her end.

On her last day, I stood at the door to her hut. Trophies no longer adorned it. She'd moved them to the rise-hut. Her chamber was a place of stillness, prepared, like her, for the inevitable.

"I've one last command for you," she said, beckoning me to her side. She'd not commanded me in years, not since we'd left the tombs. Not with that voice, at least.

I stepped closer, chains of silver tinkling. They were the signs of my service to her, for I'd become something of a shaman myself. But instead of the bones of my enemies dangling from me, it was three black finger bones of my people. They looked like three slivers of the night sky on my chest. As with so much else, I'd worn them because I'd seen no other way. Like me, they were captives with no voice.

She grimaced, pressing her hand to her gut. "You can do as you will. But I ask it."

I nodded, swallowing past the tightness of the scar in my mouth.

“Do not stay here,” she said, the faintest wince on her face. “You spoke for me alone. Speak a new fate now. Then, we will both be free.”

There was no mercy or regret in her eyes. My goddess had finally been of use to her, and that was all that mattered. It didn’t feel like a victory, though. What victory could there be when there was still so much ahead of me?

She searched beneath her silk tunic—still the rough kind made from the castoffs—and took out the only thrall token she’d ever worn. She tugged it loose and held it out to me. I untied mine and held the pair in my hands.

I was free.

“Go be a priestess,” she said.

I nodded.

Her gaze turned up, glassy and distant. Pain shot through her, and I stood there until the last, recording everything in my mind and heart.

We did not weep or embrace or show any affection, like others might who’d shared a lifetime together. We parted as rulers, as priestesses who’d held a long alliance, and a truce between our peoples... which was at an end.

From one moment to the next, after what felt like an eternity, she departed the world of the living. A shell of the person who’d defined me for so long was all that remained.

I stood vigil for her through the next day, recording the arrangement of the sky on that singular day. The great emptiness of her body still frowned, still challenging the world from death.

On her pyre, tucked into her belt, I placed the three Mornae finger bones. It was the proper thing to do. But nothing else of mine did I

leave. Like my mother, she'd always be with me, a thundering echo of memory and feeling. Death could not sunder us.

Part of her would burn in the pyre, but those of her bones believed most powerful would rest in the tombs. And one finger bone each would adorn her daughters. I'd seen the girls born, cared for them through others, and taught them the things I thought would help them, but never let them know my gift. I would only ever be Syral's tool. For she had known, in her great wisdom, that her children would be as hungry for power as she'd been.

She'd declared no heiress.

"Let them devour each other or find a way to peace," she'd said to the elders. "Let the strongest among them, the most cunning, the wisest, win. And make the peace. As I did."

I was not there when they burned her. I'd have called down blue fire on her, to leave no trace of her to anyone. The Baikal had their ways, and it was best to honor them.

O n the following day, as her ashes smoldered in the dusk light, Hendar walked up the hill toward us. He'd become a shaman, ascending past the limitation that plagued most Baikal... a brief, flashing life full of energy and rage. How long he had left to live was unknown. He was walking the infinite pathways.

I should have left already. Eyes were on me, wondering what I would do. They called me *Maker of Chieftains*. I knew the daughters of Syral would try to win me over. Part of me wanted to stay, but I'd given my word. I had poured myself out for others, and it was my turn to create something.

"I swore that day on your mother's pyre," Hendar said, "that I would find the way to teach you, to bring about the changes needed to make you a priestess. I could not know how the goddess might hear my prayer, but she did."

He crouched down beside me. His head tilted. His eyes were watery and red with age, the great lids sagging around them. Wispy gray and white hairs framed his face, loose from the thinning braids.

He reached inside his vest. "You are ready for this now, Little Matron. I have carried it for far too long."

Inside a crude sheath of leather was a *kithaun* blade. My mother's knife. Long and fine, razor sharp, cruel like an eagle's talon.

"Now you know when to strike and when to remain silent. Yours is the goddess-wisdom."

It looked too fine and narrow to be of use against a giant, but my mother had done it, uniting it to her priestly power. He offered it to me, but I hesitated. Memories of that knife in my mother's hand flooded my mind.

"She had no ring, your mother. This was all she had left."

I slid the dangerous blade back into the sheath and pressed it to my chest. Who could teach me to wield it?

"With it, you are truly a matron," he said. "You've put your house before your own pleasure, before your own comfort."

I looked at him, deep sadness welling inside me. My mother had fought to the death to be free. I had summoned blue fire not to consume my enemy, but to save her.

But had Syral been my enemy?

No, she had become, in a strange twist of fate, my family. And yet she had taken from me so very much. There was the emptiness of my mouth, the stub of what had been a tool of peace. Painful twinges reminded me from moment to moment.

He shook his head. "You speak with the voice of the goddess. Your mind is powerful now. I can feel it." He raised his hands and curled them into fists—not as large as they'd once been. "You've become a giant yourself."

He chuckled, and his eyes blinked with tears. He'd always been an odd giant, moved as much by tenderness as battle-lust.

"You can know many thoughts and feelings. You can know what a man wants to do before he is even aware and, by building his path, see his future." He smiled at me. "You do not need bones. You are

the living bones. Eye of the Goddess, they'll call you. You'll see. Not in a thousand years has there been one."

I patted his arm. My mother had been one, but it pleased him to think of himself as the reason for my rise. I pressed my thoughts into him.

"I'll go with the chief to the tomb of our ancestors," he said, answering me. "Live out my last days there with her bones. I'll seek whatever wisdom I can from that place." He turned serious then, head bowed. "But before I go, Little Matron, I have something else for you."

He held open his hand, and in it was a small fold of hide.

"Take this," he whispered. "Share it with no one."

Within the leather was a lock of dark gray and silver hair, the tips still glimmering with goddess-light. Cut within the past year, at most. On the hide was a map, written in a way only a Mornae could understand.

I pressed my finger to it, but no thought came to me. Just silence. I knew the pattern of the marks. I turned the hide left and then right. A constellation. The Blossom.

"It will show you the way to him."

My heart dared to hope.

"Syrar knew," he said. "Fennir's son lied about what happened on Mahwir's hunt, ashamed that the priceless daemon had gotten away. What happened in those woods, no one ever said. Not clearly, at least. She let you continue your growth, to make you the thing she needed. The thing you needed to be."

A final wound in this final parting. She'd let Nevaun get away with his crime... for herself and her plan. Maybe she'd done it for me, for a future she'd known was coming for me. She was gone now,

however, and I needed to see all she'd done as a good thing. I didn't want to be bitter in the cycles to come.

"Fennir made a mistake in bringing you two together. He didn't listen to me. He didn't understand that his daemon would end up serving you more than anyone else. That's how it is with your people."

He mumbled to himself.

"Syral couldn't let anyone know that Fennir was under his sway. Again, he didn't listen. Power tasted so sweet, but he didn't realize it was also a poison meant to control him. Rohn wasn't wrong to say he was a puppet—though it's much more complicated than that."

I raised my hands, questioning whether I'd done the same with Syral.

"I don't think she was ever your puppet. You used each other. You melted into each other like two different metals."

He was right, of course. I still felt her in me—her rage, her strength, her shrewdness—but shaped and molded to me. Not her, but me.

"Yours was a different sorcery."

I recalled those early days, stroking her head and whispering to her. I'd insinuated myself into her, and she'd latched onto me.

"She needed you as much as you needed her. What she did here, she did it because of you. She wouldn't have reached the heights she did."

I nodded. Nor would I have reached the heights I had.

He smiled at me, that enormous face now wrinkled, sallow, and shadowed.

"One thing I'd ask for myself, Little Matron."

I gazed at him, eyes narrowed, no longer beholden to him. Now a dispenser of favors.

“My two, the only I’ve kept. They will not do well under my sons. Brutes! They’ve learned nothing from me.”

I placed my hand on his arm and squeezed.

“Thank you, Face of the Goddess. They will serve you well.”

I made a sign that they’d be free, holding up Syral’s medallion.

He nodded, tears filling his eyes. “I never had the courage, afraid that they’d have no one to protect them in these lands. But I know you will. It is the Mornae way. To be free. To strive and thrive.”

I recalled my mother’s teachings. Hendar was quite close to the full phrase, but had left out the dire part: *to fall, to fail. And even die. And then thrive.* Thriving came from immense risk, immense cost. I swallowed a wad of saliva and let the pain roll through me. Little deaths on the goddess-path.

This was the nature of life. Nothing was ever still or perfect. There was just survival, and sometimes a kind of thriving. I had clung to that thriving, safe in Syral’s shadow. Even my mother had not known that kind of victory.

Had my mother chosen a different path, surrendered herself as a thrall so that I might escape... everything would have turned out so differently. I would have died alone, starved in the woods while she suffered a torment she could not—in her great pride—endure. My mother had seen no other way but to fight.

I’d gone a different way.

Fate had chosen different paths for us. My trivial gift had caused the rise of a great chieftain. I had been the instrument of her greatness.

Hendar and I parted ways. I left him there by the thing he’d helped create.

But my story did not end there at the funeral pyre of Syral, Daughter of the Sea and Sky, Chief of Chiefs.

Those were the days of my youth only.
For I still had to fill a cycle with deeds.
Deeds of my own.

So, on a late summer day, I started out, accompanied by Akrus and Semma, Hendar's only remaining thralls. They could have left, but they stayed with me, not knowing life without a master and no doubt fearing to be pressed into thralldom again. Already, Syral's work was eroding. Fewer of the new generation respected the customs. There'd been raids against villages of weaker tribes. Hendar's medallion would mean nothing in their hands.

I didn't press them to know the true reason, though. I'd spent too many decades pillaging the thoughts and feelings of others. I wanted to rest from it.

Akrus and Semma must have had Veikal blood in them, because they could carry twice the load I could. They showed great solicitude for each other, as if bound to one another. It pleased me for them to stay because I didn't want to be alone. I'd lived in the shadow of giants, and the open sky was overwhelming for a time yet.

We made our way as the map showed, traveling for three weeks on foot. We avoided every settlement and caravan.

One day, as we traveled over a rocky plain, I picked up a rock so black that it swallowed the sun's light. Ahead, the plain was full of it,

jutting up and breaking the earth's skin with sharp, jagged points. Beyond that rose the southern tip of a blackrock mountain range.

We pressed on.

As we drew closer, a line of darkness grew tall and spiky into a swathe of dark woods, tall and heavy with shadow. To the side of the forest was a field of green; not like the grasses of the lowlands, but here, somehow in these high places, there was the youthful green of fresh shoots, and beyond it a bright blue lake.

Sorcery was the only explanation.

Akrus and Semma set their loads down as we peered into that dense forest. There was no sign of anything, neither trails nor tracks. A somber silence hung over the place—a powerful stillness.

I closed my eyes and held the pose I'd used for decades. I called the goddess. It was easy. The great strands of power were so alive here near Vaidolin, her throne. The trees shivered as an unseen wind ran through them toward the jagged mountain wall. Again and again, I called, so that it settled into a low growling hum. Akrus and Semma crouched down, huddled about me.

Then, the call ceased, and silence returned to the forest.

No response came.

We stayed on the edge of that wilderness. Akrus made a fire, blocked off by stone slabs. I stood watch through the night, peering into the darkness and turning it to light. My vision was changing, as it had in the lost city of my people.

That is how I saw him coming.

Nevaun stood within the shadow of the tall trees, a hundred paces away, as magnificent as I remembered. His hair was longer, but still cut in the style of the knights of Isilayne: long on top and shorn at the sides. Ready for battle. The old diviner glyphs glimmered on the sides of his head.

I beckoned him closer. When he was near, he cast himself down on the moss, prostrated, the tips of his fingers touching my toes.

“Face of the Goddess,” he said, and then he hummed for a minute, as was proper.

I reached down and touched his head because I couldn’t speak a word to raise him.

He rose and looked upon me with the eyes of a consort—focused on me and my will. I had not realized how close we had become in our fleeting time together.

“We have been waiting for you, Matron,” he said.

He'd waited and born a silent pain, for he had been my consort all along, and suffered the separation even more deeply because I had thought him dead.

I tilted my head as if to ask a question and struggled to make a sound.

He approached me and took my face in his hands.

"Matron. Face of the Goddess." He kissed my forehead and my cheeks, descending to my mouth. "Consort. Voice of the Goddess."

My lips tightened, and I swallowed. A jolt of pain twinged in my mouth. He smiled and kissed me anyway.

I placed my hands over his and thought the words I wished to say, sharing my joy with him.

His eyes glistened.

We stood there for a while, lost in the moment. Then, he held out his arm to the forest.

"We... those whom I have gathered for you... we have prepared everything for your coming."

Figures approached, a long row of them. People from all corners of Vailassa. And Mornae.

As they all neared, he said to them, "Our matron is here. Now, we are complete. We are a house."

I held out my right hand, and from my palm, a single blue flame flickered. I held it there, my will alone constraining it. The flame climbed a foot and vanished, returning to the Dark.

His eyes welled with pride, with love for me. He took my hand and slipped a ring onto it. A wide *kithaun* band with a single large, dark purple gem. Power flowed from it. His name whispered to me from the steel.

He said, "They shine for you, matron. The stars."

I squeezed his hand and stepped toward these strangers who were now members of my house, and they bowed their heads. They crouched, others casting themselves down as Nevaun had. The knights, all born of Isilayne's dark womb. They alone knew the terror I'd endured to summon such power.

I raised my ringed hand to my chest. In the silence of my mind, I spoke the name which now rose in my thoughts, unfettered, free of my mother's long-held vigil over my memories.

Lor'Nadurra. A Vakayne blood house before the Lion fell into dishonor. Even though they'd cast her house out, they couldn't take its dignity as Savra's own.

"House above all," Nevaun said, loud and clear for all to hear. "Lor'Nadurra. Born of Savra's left hand."

They all stood and repeated the words.

No tenderness swelled in me; no warmth for them. I was their matron, their high priestess, their general and executioner if necessary. Taught by a Baikal legend, I could begin my rise to power.

I swallowed and mouthed the words, *House above all.*

My father stood at the archway, leaning as he did with his arms crossed. He lowered his eyes, a pained expression on his face.

My mother, his consort, had never told the story that way before, even though it ended in victory for them both. In the past, she'd always talked of Syral's prowess, her conquests and deeds. I'd left out details to protect him from guilt or regret.

As my mother had shared the story through me, it had come to me as two threads twined together... one for the others, and one for me. I'd spoken one aloud and kept the other to myself. That secret thread held wisdom meant only for a matron. She'd let me decide how to tell it. Even then, in the story's telling, I'd been shaping our future—setting our fate through story.

Her pleasure, her pride, filled me with confidence. I'd done well. A matron, a priestess, must judge when and where to tell her secrets.

This talent for sharing different layers of thought and feeling at once was a clear sign of her power. Losing her tongue had driven her to learn other ways to communicate. My admiration for her grew.

Her face was smooth and untouched by time, like a silver mirror, but her crystalline eyes wept. I daubed the tears from her eyes. Her feelings intensified. Her fingers closed around my wrist. Someday, I

would sit in her place as her heiress. In the depths of her heart, she hoped I had learned from her life, that I should not have to pass through the same trials she had.

The others watched her in awe, wanting to catch her tears like they were treasures.

She swallowed, and a twinge rippled over her smooth features. That pain was with her always.

Her knowledge was mine. I had only the beginnings of her gift, and I would have to find a way to awaken my latent power.

Unlike her, I had a house, a father, cousins and relations, a people, and someday a consort of my own. I looked at him, the one I favored. Dark gray hair, charcoal skin, icy blue eyes. Together, we'd unite two ancient bloodlines and begin restoring our people... in this place far from the crater and the corruption that poisoned it from the inside out.

These were all good things, pleasing to the goddess, but it would not be enough. I, too, must undergo my own trials, or else remain ordinary, unfavored, a simple woman. To become a priestess—a high priestess, a voice of the goddess—I must face death with every step pushed beyond the bounds of possibility.

The Dark beckoned. It waited for me—only if I had the courage to follow its infinite pathways.

Her hand moved to her chest, where I knew she still wore the medallion, the one struck with both emblems. It was proof of her story, though she never showed it. I sensed she'd be showing it soon. Mornae had come asking her for the Baikal's help.

This was a sign to me, another unraveling of a fate-thread.

What would that fate speak to me?

THE END

Read on for a preview of the next [book](#) in this series, and learn about an explorer who travels the world in a desperate search for the source of magic.

BEYOND THE MOON SEA PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

Kores had yet to see the ritual victim.

A northern breeze chilled his skin as he squinted at the setting sun. Bronze hairs stood on end, cracking the pattern of gray lines coiling about his arms. The scarlet silk scarf about his neck lifted away, as did the scarves of the other men in the crowd, flapping in the inconstant wind. As one, the crowd lifted its arms, exposing armpits and sides to the cooler air. Ash-laced sweat and ritual oils seeped into their pristine white loincloths, turning the fringes gray. A drop of lilac-scented oil trickled from Kores's right temple and down his cheek, through the symbols traced on his skin. He wiped the oil away with the back of his hand, smudging them.

He resisted crinkling his nose as the scent of sweating bodies, lilac, and ash wafted deep into his nostrils. He'd suffer any odor to be at their ritual.

The witnesses—a group of twenty to thirty men, women, and children of the Wedoni tribe—sat huddled together, facing north from the south side of a grassy, windswept hill. To the west, fields of long grass tumbled down to the city walls and the terraced facade of Toruk, a great walled city surrounding the bay. Toruk's white stone face descended toward a sparkling bay. The sun was setting

between the bay's rocky arms, which held back treacherous and fierce waters. Hundred-foot-tall stone spires stood watch between the arms. Waves whittled away at them, and one day they'd crumble, but for now, tiny white sails safely dotted the bay.

Celebration pavilions and tents dotted the pastures between the city gate and the sacred mound. The cooking pits were already red with hot coals. A creeping forest of vines and tall, thin trees surrounded the sacred mound to the south. Cool shadows darkened the ground beneath the canopy.

A large copper cauldron sat at the mound's pinnacle. That was where the victim would appear, where they'd perform their ritual sacrifice.

The sun had baked Kores all day, and he'd little to show for it but sweat. He jotted another entry in his battered leather-bound journal. Since starting the vigil ten hours ago, every entry was like the one before it:

Late afternoon. No sign of the victim. No candidates or electors. No sign of power.

He glanced at the previous entries—a mantra of his only reason for being there. The Ulsic Schools wanted him in the west for knowledge of sea-going vessels and trade for grain and foodstuffs—anything to stave off famine on his home continent of Nenelessa. The Wedoni knew no hunger, even the poorest of them. Their wealth was beyond the Schools' dreams.

But Kores was there for a reason of his own. He underlined the word *power* in each entry.

"Sayin selada. Sayin otrede," a man among the witnesses chanted.

The witnesses repeated the chant in hushed tones. As one, they looked to the west and held their bronzed hands up to the diving sun

as its rays cut across the sea, the white marble city of Toruk, the surrounding hills, the plains, and struck the Solumma Range. The sun's rays were so dense that a tiny boy stood up and tried to grasp one. The Wedoni had waited all day for this moment, when the sun's light—Sayin's light—shot out over the world like spears, a last volley through Solumma's mighty peaks and into the land of death, a vast expanse that had once been Sayin's own empire.

"If not for Saylassa," Kores whispered out of habit. He made note of the chant, translating as best he could. *Sayin departs. Sayin returns.*

He sketched an outline of the peaks, trying to capture the way the sun struck them at this time of year. *Solumma* was what the Wedoni called the mountain range. Tall and brooding, the range stood like a breaker against the gray death that reigned on the other side. The word meant a high bank, but these were lofty, impassable mountains.

Kores knew the range by another name: the Western Waste Range. That was its official name within the Ulsic Schools. Its *proper* name. His own people named everything north of Nenelassa by its relationship to the Waste. No matter the passage of time, the gray waste, the sucking vastness of it, never let them—or the Wedoni—move on. He rubbed at flecks of ash on his arm. No, it was here with them even after two and a half millennia.

"Solumma," he whispered. The children near him whispered it back. He flashed a grin at them, and they giggled. They were not yet immune to his charms.

He rubbed the pencil between his fingers, considering what to name the sketch. The work he did was for the Schools, and his oath to it had carried him to this far-off land. That oath had paid for his steward, his team, the journal, and even the little pencil between his

fingers. By oath, every word he wrote was theirs. He knew what he ought to write but a natural rebelliousness roused itself. It took so little. He chuckled to himself and wrote "Solumma" beneath the sketch. He basked in the dying sun's light and grinned.

So be it.

He was unconventional. Infamous, even. Not like anyone would ever read the journal. He'd already violated the headmaster's command by removing his jacket, the one with his master's insignia, but the Wedoni had required that he dress as a witness if he wanted to attend their ritual.

Over the years headmasters had warned him not to get too close to the peoples he studied. Kores could never heed his superiors in this matter. Gadrey, the current headmaster, had pleaded with him to obey, just this once. Kores didn't enjoy pressing the man, making him look a fool to his council, but he couldn't be otherwise.

"Can't help myself," he said under his breath.

A girl, one of his host's grandchildren, fascinated by his sketch of the range, reached over to trace it with her finger. She popped up from her seat to trace the real range with her two hands. She giggled as one of the older women waved her down. The other children snickered at her and huddled closer to watch Kores draw. He suppressed a laugh and nodded at the women.

As the sun touched the horizon, a group of ten elders appeared, marching over the sacred mound's west side. White-haired and shriveled like dried dates, they played taut leather hand drums, deep-throated flutes, and white ox horns. They filled the air with raucous, rambling music. The witnesses clapped to the awkward rhythm. Men stood and danced, gleaming like crescent moons in the brilliant light, as the elders sat on the grass near the cauldron.

Kores stole precious moments to write the details in his journal. The Wedoni seemed transformed. Gone were the shrewd merchants, the richly dressed masters of marble palaces, fishing fleets, and a populous city-state. A strange people had replaced them as they performed this cosmic play. He drove the pencil through oil, ash, and the sweat of his hand, recording every thought. The clapping quickened, and he looked up. He wanted to clap as well, but pencil and journal held him captive.

A balding elder with stubborn white hairs plastered across his crown stood up from among the Wedoni elders. Shrunken with age, his wiry body tensed and tightened as he blew on a curled, black ram's horn. The blast filled the air with more sound than a horn that size should have been able to make. The man blew the horn four more times. A shiver ran through the crowd; witnesses shook out their hands as if releasing hidden energy. Young children whimpered, fearful of the shuddering sensation washing over them.

Power. It had to be.

A final blast hushed the crowd.

Kores's host approached the copper cauldron. Bulek Nahran was a stout, heavy man with a square slab of a face and a slim topknot of yellow-white hair crowning his head. A long scarlet tunic draped his bulk. He carried a three-foot-tall, cylindrical black urn. Standing beside the cauldron, the urn slid through his thick, meaty fingers, and landed with a sharp *clang* on a stone pedestal. He removed the lid, and dust lifted away from the stone's lip like an exhalation.

Just that morning, Kores had sketched the urn. It sat, day after day, alone and venerated, in the Nahran clan's sanctuary. The urn never left its pedestal, except on this day, the Wedoni's most sacred day. In that marble-lined sanctuary, the Nahran women had opened the urn and adorned the men's bodies with lines drawn in its gray

dust. They'd spread oils through Kores's bronze hair, slicking back its thick waves, forking his beard into three sections, and painting unfamiliar symbols all over his body. There were no other symbols on the estate—neither in tapestries, nor rugs, nor carved into stone. An elder woman of the Nahran had explained that only their women could keep and teach such knowledge, and they revealed it at the annual ritual. The whimsical symbols meant nothing to Kores. He'd noted them in the journal, anyway.

On this most sacred day, the elector women would choose men to procreate with. It was for this—to know how they made their choice—that Kores would sacrifice the last sliver of respectability he had as a master of the Ulsic Schools.

He squinted at the sun boiling on the horizon. Surging crests of mountainous waves sliced through the steam. A rush of wind from the bay lifted wisps of gray dust from the urn's narrow mouth. Motes spiraled, carried up by the warmer sea air.

Gray flecks alighted on the open page before him, where he'd made a note of the ram's horn and the inner tremor he'd felt with its blast. His bones still shuddered, the strangest sensation. He blew the dust away respectfully. *Dust of the dead*. The Waste had consumed Saylassa—the largest and central continent—twenty-five hundred years ago. Saylassa, the golden and eternal. The words of blessing quivered on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't speak the phrase. His mind couldn't resist, though, and the words manifested in his thoughts.

If not for Saylassa.

The words were a prayer or a curse. He'd seen what Saylassa looked like now, and he thought it a curse. Solumma's lofty peaks had protected the Wedoni from the destruction, and yet these people brought Saylassa's remains, that incomprehensible death, into their

lush green lands bounded by life-sustaining bays and inlets to serve a mysterious purpose in their ritual. They venerated the dust, but Kores didn't think it possessed any power.

An elder stood and uttered what sounded like a prayer. Kores squeezed his pencil. He'd not heard the words, but everyone else had, and they clapped in response.

The ritual could begin.

A pair of girls with braided yellow hair and long, narrow bodies dressed in white cotton dresses, bearing no adornment or symbol, approached the cauldron. Kores glanced about, but the Wedoni only smiled at the girls. He shuddered. Surely, *they* were not the sacrifice.

Each pair of girls carried a copper vat between them. They stood at the cauldron and lifted their vat to the rim. A thick, gulping, plum-red stream flowed from the vat into the cauldron. The girls waited until the last drops emptied into it, then stepped away. Four more pairs of girls did the same, each emptying their own vats into the cauldron. Bulek inspected the contents before he waved the girls off, then sat on a small wooden stool of ebon wood, taking his place with the other clan leaders.

A crone stepped out from the elders, a copper ladle in hand, and stirred the pot. She was the eldest woman of the Nahran and had birthed twenty-three healthy children. It would have been a miracle amongst Kores's own people for so many children to live, but here, it seemed normal. So long as the Wedoni performed the rituals and followed the customs, they thrived.

Fuzzy white hairs floated about the crone's head as she gazed into the cauldron. She raised the ladle, bright and dripping scarlet, over its rim. Her left hand, curled into a claw, reached through the urn's neck. A dusty cloud erupted from the urn's mouth when her hand reemerged from its depths. She sprinkled the dust into the

ladle's bowl, dipped the utensil back into the pot, and stirred again. Three times she mixed in the dust of Saylassa, the dead with the living.

"If not for Saylassa," Kores whispered, stilled for a moment from his note-taking and thinking. Once the dust cleared, Kores noted the details of the crone's actions. His little finger brushed away the pencil's lead splinters from the bone-white paper.

The horns blasted again, and the witnesses shivered with each bellow.

The candidates, a hundred Wedoni men, processed toward the cauldron from the east side of the hill. Dressed in white loincloths, but without scarlet sashes, they stomped their feet in unison with the horns, clapping and chanting. Whorls of gray symbols snaked about their tan bodies and thick ropes of straw hair coiled around their necks. They'd trimmed their beards along their jawlines, sharp and clean, with the fronts oiled and braided into three strands. Eyes of amber, hazel, and walnut blazed in the late afternoon sun. The Wedoni were a handsome people, lean and strong of limb. Kores was certain they had Alcar blood.

Five mature Wedoni women, the electors, approached from the west and stood across from the candidates. Ankle-length linen skirts decorated with strips of red fox fur and strands of copper beads clung to their wide, swaying hips. Thick bands of beaten copper adorned their wrists and arms. Bright strands of burnished gold streaked the towers of yellow hair twisted above their heads, held in place with wide copper circlets. More bands of copper fanned out over their bare bosoms. They wore no adornment on their faces.

Kores felt the end of the page and turned to a fresh one. He drank in every detail, and the pencil continued its journey across the pages of the journal.

He glanced to the left where the forest line ended. Through a curtain of oiled hair, he observed the shadows. Had it been a beckoning motion? He swallowed the stub of a pencil in a white-knuckled fist. It must be Verko, the Headmaster's lackey, spying. Verko had watched Kores's every move from the first day they'd set foot on the skiff that carried them across the Straits. Kores strained to see against the encroaching darkness, but there was only the play of light and shadow through the forest's limbs and trunks.

The crone cried out in a high-pitched squeal.

The pencil jerked across the page. He'd been deep in thought, preoccupied with the forest's edge. The woman's words meant nothing to him, but the candidates stomped more vigorously, building up a sweat, and the electors clapped and swayed, copper jewelry clinking. He rubbed away the jagged line as best he could, but his oily, sweaty fingers just turned it into a huge smudge. Turning the page, he wrote a heading at the top of the new one.

All but the drums quieted. The thrum slowed and deepened, like a massive, beating heart. Kores took advantage of the break to fill the page with notes. Bulek's clan pressed around to watch him write. They didn't know his letters but smiled as the pencil danced across the page.

Though literate—any Wedoni child could read a ledger—the Wedoni had no tradition of writing their tales or poems. They spoke or sang them. To them, writing was a base task for keeping the accounts of trade. Only the voice of a thinking person could utter ineffable thoughts and feelings. The children giggled to see so many words strung together on a page.

As the sun's rays reached their sharpest angle and shone through two tall peaks at Solumma's center, the crone held her hands to the sky. The facade of the range appeared aflame. To the

north of the two peaks, a rush of gray dust rose into the sky like a giant wave crashing into a cliff. More waves followed, and the mass of dust joined with the clouds. A titanic form took shape, a challenger to the dying sun.

Grinning children patted Kores. He was beaming, eyes watering from the sheer joy of it. Even though he knew the source of those dust waves, awe filled him.

The Wedoni shared his emotion, every eye wide and breath held. The dust waves must have been a good omen, because the crone motioned to a clutch of women well past their fertile years. Clad in long, tent-shaped hoods made of woven straw, the women held out copper bowls, and the crone filled them with the cauldron's contents. As one, these holy women, keepers of the clan's history and mysteries, stepped toward the five electors, the current mothers of the Nahran clan.

Each elector accepted a bowl and held it up, voluptuous bodies swaying in their shadows. Then, each drank from her bowl, and returned it empty to a holy woman. One elector wiped her lips and brushed her hand on her skirt. A long trail of bright red streaked across it. Kores stared at the blemish, and an idea formed in the back of his mind, the pieces of legend and myth arranging themselves for his understanding.

The Wedoni were blood drinkers.

Kores had expected a ritual sacrifice; a human body on an altar, and then the eating of it. But now he understood.

It wasn't human flesh they ate, but blood.

His stomach tightened. There was enough of it to feed the entire clan. His pencil hovered over the page, and he glanced at the shadowed wood. The discovery should disgust him, but he'd not judge how a people found their power. He recorded the event,

avoiding complicit words. That anyone might think he favored these people...

He despised himself for his momentary cowardice, but he'd remember, and would write it in a book later. Every detail.

The electors raised their hands to the dying sun, lips blood-stained, eyes wide and shining as if the sun gave them secret wisdom.

Kores watched but saw nothing. His confidence ebbed. Was this another fool's quest? Was the headmaster right about him? His hand rested heavy against the page as frustration rippled through him.

"Just wait," he said under his breath, wiping away the cold sweat beading on his face.

BEYOND THE MOON SEA PREVIEW

CHAPTER 2

Kores tugged on his beard, impatient for what would come next. The Wedoni just looked to the setting sun, bound by a silence he couldn't perceive. Even the children looked on, rapt. He stared down at his darkened notes, trying to ignore the dancing spots left in his vision by staring too long into the western horizon.

A single drum thumped, and the candidates formed into a line. The first man approached the cauldron, and the crone held the copper ladle up to him. A fit young man, handsome of face and form, he cupped the ladle with his hands and gulped down the contents with relish. One by one, the candidates drank. Blood, sometimes clots of it, dribbled through their beards and down their necks, snaking through their chest hairs. As the last man guzzled his portion, the drums stopped. The horns blasted, filling the air with an unrelenting throb.

The men stood in rows of ten, arm's length apart, marching in place. Their eyes darkened and glazed over into a far-seeing stare. Others stopped moving altogether. This was their moment of ecstasy.

The electors moved toward the candidates and the horns stopped. All went still. Kores's heart pounded in his ears as

expectation heightened. He closed his journal, one thumb lodged within the closed pages to keep his place. Here, at last, he might see the thing he'd come west to find. Power. Enchantment. Divinity. The ignorant would call it by the cruder name of *magic*, but this was no trick or illusion.

Lost in their reveries, the candidates stared past the setting sun to where the Siren cluster shimmered into view above the fire-red sea. The electors, as tall as the men, moved through them, swaying as they walked, sometimes touching them. One waved her hands in front of a man's eyes, assessing the truth of his ecstasy. The women inspected each of the men in this way as the sun blinked at the horizon.

Three Wedoni men fell out of ecstasy. Their faces turned down upon realizing they'd failed so early. They walked away in silence toward the celebration tents. Minutes later, another batch left, until only five remained staring into the unknown. The electors each claimed a man, taking him by the hand and leading him away to a large tent designated for their sacred purpose.

The Wedoni lit torches as the sun became a mere glow on the horizon and the stars emerged.

"Sayintae," a boy said. Kores just nodded and smiled at the boy. They'd been calling him *sayintae* since he'd arrived. The boy insisted, motioning to the cauldron. Kores's throat tightened. The witnesses were forming a line. They, too, would drink from the cauldron. The children sang out the word, encouraging him. Hands pressed on him to stand and follow.

He looked at the forest's tree line but saw nothing. His innards twisted and writhed like the vines and trunks. The crowd made its way to the cauldron. Kores hugged his journal to his chest as the Wedoni flowed around him. The last time he'd become too involved

with a tribe, he'd spent ten years with the Juula, unaccounted for and presumed dead. More recently, there'd been his time with the Cascar. Three years he'd spent with them, traversing the border of the Waste. Then, there'd been that time with the Kinari. And the Havic before that. A parade of peoples, rituals, histories, and garb passed through his mind, each memory claiming a part of his long life.

His actions would displease the headmaster and council if he once again veered from their clear directives, but he wasn't averse to bending their rules, skirting their meaning. He stuffed his journal in the leather satchel slung across his chest. One last time, he looked over to the woods and saw nothing but shadows under the low trees.

Headmaster Gadrey always reminded Kores he was *only* a cartographer. More than that, he was no arcanist to understand the secret workings of power. Did he think himself an Alcar, a divine being? This last question had come from the master's council and seared Kores's mind with frustration. All he wanted from the Wedoni was to know their practice of power. Taking part in their rituals was the first step to gaining access to their secrets.

The Wedoni children urged him on.

His feet moved, deciding for him.

The lilac in his oiled hair mingled with the cauldron's rusty aroma. His nose twitched, but he stilled any sign of disgust. The crone presented the ladle, heavy with blood, to his lips.

The Wedoni murmured as one: "Sayintae."

Sky-man. Or was it *sun-man*? The cool metal of the ladle pressed to his lips, and hands patted or stroked his back and arms. He looked up to the sky, to the brightest stars peeking through the evening clouds. It was best not to look at the ladle. His lips parted. The liquid, warm and metallic, filled his mouth, and he swallowed.

His tongue ran over his lips, taking in the last drops. It was fresh. Someone wiped his chin.

The Wedoni nodded their approval.

“*Moshe den atto,*” the crone said. *Men of the rings.* She grinned at him with blood-stained teeth. He swallowed again to clear the taste.

The mature women, full lips the color of ripe cherries, looked him over and nodded. What did they see in him? He felt no different, just giddy with the thrill of yet another initiation. His hand felt for the journal, itching to write his experiences before they became a hazy memory.

When all the witnesses had had their taste of the cauldron’s brew, Bulek’s daughters took Kores by the arms and led him toward the fires. Torches blazed along the path, blinding him to the depths of the surrounding woods.

He paused. Bodies hung from posts along the forest’s edge. Colossal heads with heavy yellow tusks hung from hooks nearby. He sighed. That it was boar’s blood in the cauldron would make no difference to the headmaster and his council. The ritual would still disgust them.

Another set of posts loomed in the darkness, and he moved toward them.

“This way, sayintae,” the women said, stroking his arms. They kept him on the path. He looked over his shoulder, but one woman turned his head, cooing the title they’d given him.

He’d come west with the vague clue that the Wedoni ate their enemies in ritual ceremonies, but he’d yet to meet anyone in the fair seaside city who seemed a flesh eater. Or a blood drinker.

But they *had* drunk blood. *He’d* drunk it.

Only boar blood, he reminded himself.

He swallowed again. The tang clung to the back of his throat. He gripped the satchel holding his journal. He'd give anything for solitude to make notes and think, but he was a polite guest. The Wedoni would feast for days, but he'd only be there for the first night. His stomach fluttered. As always, like previous missions, too many questions remained unanswered. He'd been with the Wedoni for seven months. The headmaster's council estimated it would take two months to make connections with the region's merchants. They hadn't been wrong, as Bulek and his clan were eager to trade with outsiders.

But once again, Kores had overstayed the mission's requirements and chosen to pursue his own agenda. The Wedoni had been reticent to share the details of their history and the nature of their power. The rumor among the few masters who'd studied the western tribes was that the Wedoni were ageless. Crones and elders cackled together by a fire. He could at least dispel that rumor upon his return.

Children danced and played between the fires, chasing each other with switches. Butchered boars twisted on iron spits over red-hot coals and billowing smoke. Young men turned them under the careful watch of an older man. New fires burned bright, crackling and whistling as the flames ripped open strands of spicewood.

Bulek's daughters sat Kores by a fire, and the rest of the clan swarmed him. They bade him farewell with necklaces of copper beads and feathers. They kissed his cheeks and his forehead, patting and stroking him. Young men clad in white tunics, next year's candidates, with necklaces of white flowers piled about their necks and chests, served him chunks of spice-drenched boar and a cup of intoxicating drink. Drums thumped and deep-throated flutes blared, drowning out all other sounds.

Kores took a bite from the boar, its juices running down his chin and beard. The spices heated his face, clearing his head. He breathed out hard. The nearby Wedoni chuckled.

As the night progressed, the fires singed his eyes with their brightness. Shadows and shapes stamped themselves in his mind. He blinked in vain to clear the images. He moaned. His head swam. A server poured more of the liquor into his cup. Those at his fire stared at him, their eyes fierce and bright. They chuckled or grinned as the flames stretched and contorted, creeping in on him, and in the fires, he thought he saw the shapes of men, not boars. He shook his head.

“Won’t you dance, sayintae?” a man asked him.

Kores shook his head. He didn’t think he could stand. Memories of past initiations haunted him from the shadows. How many had there been? Twelve? Thirteen? Tribes as far off as the Juula and as near as his own Dalmothi had ushered him through the first stages of their power rituals. On Kores’s twelfth birthday, his grandfather had walked him to a promontory on Mount Atrea, overlooking the Straits. With the sky clear as could be, they’d stared over the narrow gap between Nenelassa and Saylassa, over the haze of gray that went on forever to the North.

“It’s green,” his grandfather had said. “Don’t you see?”

Kores had shaken his head.

“There, far. Try hard.”

And he tried. His grandfather wouldn’t move until he saw it.

It had seemed to him then that the ritual was one of hope. If you couldn’t hope to see the green, then you’d never see it. He’d nodded, humoring his grandfather.

“Yes, Grandfather. I see it now. It is green.”

Intense red bodies danced about the fires. He blinked, and the bodies blazed gold and orange with trails of lava-red sweat cutting through the symbols on their bodies, distorting them. Then everything turned red again, blood surging through their bodies like spring rivers. The beating of their hearts joined with the thrumming of drums. He looked down into his cup, and only blackness swirled within. He emptied it, and trailing the burn of alcohol, tasted a familiar tang.

“It’s red, Grandfather,” he whispered to himself.

The throbbing beats overtook his body. His mind and his senses drifted with the red and yellow streams. Before he knew it, he’d risen to dance, stomping and clapping to their rhythm, one with their song.

This couldn’t end well, but he didn’t care.

Continue reading Kores’s [adventure](#).

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APPENDICES

From the *Compendium of Knowledge* compiled by the 17th Conclave under the direction of Silthan na'Roturra.

Persons of note in the rise of the Baikal chieftain, Syral of the Zelaugr.

Mornae

Jassae: Born of Lor'Nadurra's exiled matron <the name is scratched out>, captured by the Baikal as a child, the goddess-relic of Syral Zelaugr.

Nevaun: Born of Lor'Kisvir, consort to Jassae Lor'Nadurra, Fennir's thrall, exiled during the fourth purge.

Baikal

Hendar: Black Boar, later a shaman of some note.

Raurim: Shaman of the Hill who witnessed Jassae's oracle.

Rigir: Shaman of the Hill who witnessed Syral take power.

Trosgan: Black Wolf Chief, Syral's father.

Syral: Daughter of Trosgan, Yorl's twin, Chief of Chiefs and Mother of Many.

Yorl: Son of Trosgan, Syral's twin.

Timoth: Black Wolf, Syral's pledge.

Fain: Black Wolf, Syral's pledge

Womtha: Black Wolf, Syral's pledge.

Hiltham: Red Boar, Syral's pledge and lover, later rebel against Zelaugr rule.

Veikal

Loga: The head Veikal woman of Syral's household.

Dormu: Member of Syral's household, later betrayed her to the Yellows.

Vilki: Member of Syral's household, befriended Jassae, died from injuries sustained during the Reds' uprising.

Malgog: Veikal hunter, Jassae's guard.

Tonn: Veikal hunter, Jassae's guard.

Thralls

Mari: An Ithkan killed by Yorl's supporters, friend to Jassae, a historian sold into slavery by her own people for political reasons.

Thuka: a middle-aged woman from the region between the Dragon Mountains and the Moon Sea. One of the two slaves that first befriend Jassae.

Chana: Dragon Lands slave, bought from southern Baikal by Jassae.

Noreh: Dragon Lands slave, bought from southern Baikal by Jassae.

Mornae and Baikal terms in use during the Baikal's sixth war of unification.

aela: short name for aelaku

aelaku: breath of aela

Aelath: Baikal goddess of the air, wind, the in-between space.

Barka: Baikal god of the sea, storms, and often weather.

dreka: Baikal insult for the lowest of all possible things.

draka: Baikal word meaning cursed.

kith: Mornae word for blackrock.

kithaun: Mornae word for blacksteel, an enchanted metal crafted from blackrock ore.

vaizora: Mornae word for the goddess's dawning.

vaizoren: Mornae word for the goddess's path across the world.

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For the BFA: Never Quit

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcela Carbo writes dark, sometimes grim, character focused, epic, high fantasy. She also writes the occasional Sci-fi short story.

Thank you for reading *Fate's Long Shadow*. She hopes you enjoyed it and are curious to read more stories told in this world. There are more novels and stories to come.

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