

# ALASSTIAN BORN

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Red Ink Books

ALASSIAN BORN  
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*This book is dedicated to the memory  
of my grandmother  
Rosa.*

*She made the most delicious cordon bleu.*

*“He could dimly see the grey forms of two elves sitting motionless with their arms about their knees, speaking in whispers.”*

J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *The Lord of the Rings*

## PROLOGUE

IT WAS A WOODEN GATE in the closed fence surrounding the garden. It was very big and dark, with thick mahogany doors that shone in the sunlight. It wasn't magical or special. Father had said there were things in the world that were special, but this wasn't one of them, this was just a wooden gate.

And yet to the child, sometimes it didn't seem like a gate at all. Sometimes it shimmered, filling with minuscule lights that quivered and fidgeted bumping into one another, pushing and pulling. He could see shapes beyond it, shapes made of colorful bright lights that didn't stand still, but moved like living things, walking this way and that, beating wings in the sky, shaking branches in the wind. They did all the things that living things do.

There was a world beyond the gate, a world he could glimpse through the fabric of the gate itself.

Father called it the *outside*.

*Outside* there were voices, not voices that the child could *hear* but voices that just *were*. Only, they hadn't always *been*. They'd begun *being* the first time the gate had not seemed like a gate, and they had not stopped *being* since.

# 1

## THE CHILD

HE WOKE TO THE chirping of a bird perched on the sill of his open window, his eyes heavy from a tiring, troubled night. He sat up and rubbed the dribble from his mouth with the heel of his fist. The sun was low, hidden beneath the branches of the trees, but the day had begun to warm. It was already time. He gasped.

He bolted out of bed, crashing clumsily into the door trim before stumbling through, missing the first step down the staircase. He caught the wooden handrail and hugged it tightly, proceeding to descend each step carefully till his feet found the safety of the short grass. He ran, calling out as he crossed the shaded garden, "Father! Father, can I go with you?"

Miriethal paused with a hand against the gate. The many long braids of his chalky hair brushed the grass, swaying gently, before catching up to the new state of things, becoming still. When he turned, the rays of morning lit a frown on his face. He gazed down, his ivory eyes

each inked with only the tiniest black pupil. He said, "Not today, child."

"Then when can I go?"

"When you are older."

"How much older?" He had not been old enough the last time this had happened, and he was, now, nearly four years old.

"When you have grown to match my height," his father said. "Now stay with Tashira. I shall be back soon."

Tashira roared sleepily from somewhere among the garden trees; then she was silent.

He sat in the grass watching the gate doors close and hide his father from sight. The morning dew wet his naked legs and small braies, but that particular problem did not concern him. A much bigger problem did.

It had taken him well over three years to become as tall as he was now, and unless he found a better way to do it, it would likely take him another three or even four years to match his father's height. That would simply not do. He was done with staying at home, done with being left behind, and done with being a child. He wanted to see the wonders beyond the gate, to meet the strangers that lived outside, and to go with his father into the forests he'd glimpsed all about.

Home was not always a bad place to be, and actually, it was usually just fine. It was a great house of living trees, of wooden walls, a roof made of reeds, and far above, a green canopy of leaves. Great roots stretched out from the ground like folds of cloth, so tall that he had to bend his head back and look up to the sky to see where they merged into trunks. The hot sun shone over a garden of grasses and weeds, and berry-laden shrubs, and the air



smelled of flowers: the yellow lionprides with their manes of round petals, the tiny white whispers huddled densely in clusters, and the red tulips, their cups raised to the skies.

He knew the trees that made his home were very old—his father had told him so. He also knew that trees required plenty of water and sun to grow. So when the sun rose above the highest branches, he walked to the green pond at the garden's heart and stepped in the middle of it. He stood there like a tree, his arms outstretched to the blue sky. The water nuzzled his hips.

He didn't feel himself getting any taller. Only tired, and slightly cold.

When Tashira woke from her long nap, she demanded he came out of the pond and play with her. He chased her as she bounded about the garden, and she let him climb on her back and hustled him around in a frenzy. But when their games bored her, she went to lick her black fur dazzling clean and dozed off in the sun, leaving him alone with his worries.

In the late afternoon on the following day, his father returned, looking disheveled, with a bright red dot painted on his forehead and a line on his lips.

Father kneeled to kiss him on the cheek, then without a word headed up the spiral staircase to the warm wooden rooms overlooking the garden.

He followed upstairs. "Why can't I go with you?"

Father leaned his ivory sword against the wall and bent to untie the laces of his leather boots. His hands moved wearily, yet with urgent impatience. "I am tired, child," Father said.

These words were of no use to him, because already his own eyes, which had been light and lively before Father's return, had since become heavy and slowed with a terrible drowsiness. He pouted and watched Father undress, toss his white robe at a chair, miss, pick it up, and hang it over the back. Father lay on the wide puffy cotton mattress, pulled the sheets over himself, and closed his eyes. At last, peeking toward him, Father said yawning, "It isn't . . . saafe for a child."

He, too, yawned. He rubbed his sleepy eyes with his fists, then yawned again. His steps were light and silent over the wooden floor. He climbed onto the wide mattress, slipped under the sheets, huddled close to his father's warmth, and soon fell fast asleep.

"TAKE ME WITH YOU!" he said one day when he was five. He was in his room above the garden, sitting on his small bed still warm from the night's sleep. The first light of morning came through the open window.

"You know I cannot do that."

"But I can hunt with you, I can!" Hunt, he had learned, was what his father did when he was gone for days, sometimes one day, sometimes two or three. Once, it had been more days than he could even count, although back then he had been too small to add past the number of his fingers, and in truth he could not be sure it had been as many days as that, because once or twice he'd forgotten how many fingers he'd already counted. He had done a great deal of crying when his father had come home at last, ill and weak.

"I do not need you to hunt with me, child. What I need is that you stay hidden, that you stay safe. You stay

here.” Father’s gaze was earnest, and his word final. “I must go, now.”

Burning tears filled his eyes as Father turned his back to him. His lips began to tremble. He did not watch him go, but curled into a ball under the bedclothes and breathed in damp air, sweltering in his own breath. When he could no longer bear the heat, he slipped the linen from his head and used it to dry his eyes and nose.

Later that day, he perched on the balls of his feet in the warm grass, his lips pursed tight and a frown pushing his brows down. The closed gate stood mockingly in front of him. From each of the two doors, a thick twisted handle hung some distance above the ground. He reckoned that if he stretched himself on his toes, he could reach the handles with only the tips of his fingers. But he would definitely reach them.

“I’m going out,” he said.

Tashira made not the slightest move. Her huge black feline form lay seemingly asleep in front of the doors. Her pretense did not fool him. He had pondered the matter long that morning, back in his room. There would be no stopping him.

He rose upright. “I know you hear me.”

Tashira opened a round yellow eye, as big as a full-grown apricot, and looked at him. She did not move.

“Let me pass!” he ordered.

The *kaara* opened her other eye and stood up on her hefty, furry legs. She was much, much taller than he was. She bent her head down so that her snout almost touched his nose. Then she growled. Between her black lips flashed walls of pointy yellow teeth. Her thick fangs split apart, her pink tongue flattened against the floor of her

mouth, and a roar boomed out of her.

But his mind was made up, and he was not afraid. He brought forth focus to his eyes and made them shine with ruby light. He watched Tashira's shape brighten with the inner flow of her energies. He no longer saw black fur. Instead, he saw the life's movements within her body: the beating of her heart, the seeing of her eyes, the thinking of her mind. Her shape was dense and smooth as marble, yet it shimmered from within with strength and motion. He raised a hand, and ushered her aside—gently, because Father had taught him he must be kind to the weak. Against her will, the forest cat plodded away from the gate; then she stood immobile in the grass and watched him.

He let his focus wane, and his sight stilled.

Stretching on his toes, he reached for one of the metal handles. He could only just touch it. Leaning against one door, he slipped his fingers behind the handle of the other, and pulled.

THE CITY OF IRIETH dwelled at the heart of a lush jungle of ages past. Houses fashioned from wood and living trees hid beneath the green line of the high canopy, as a coral reef lying unseen in the depths of the sea. Its people were wise and long-lived, with pale skin, white hair, and ivory eyes. They called themselves "Alassians" and counted the years of their lives in centuries. The children born in the city were few—only one every decade or two—so that all children were known by all and loved by all. For life was precious to the Alassians, and especially that of a rare child of their kind.

So when a boy three feet tall, dressed in loose garments

of rosewood red, made his appearance outside the keeper's home in bright daylight—a slight figure in the thin gap between hefty doors—the Alassians came to stare and wonder. The child stood still and watched them in return. Until then, he had only known one other who was the same as he, Alassian and not a creature of the wild: his father, Miriethal. Now he saw others, many others—tall people gathering round, talking to one another, looking at him. Fear came into his heart and held him speechless.

One of the people stepped forward—the robe, brown like the earth, whispered in the grass step after step until it stopped.

The boy looked up at the face smiling down at him, but he did not see it smile, he saw it grin.

The stranger spoke, but the boy did not hear the words, for his heart beat too loudly. He turned, and ran. Through the garden, past the pond, up the stairs, and into his room. He shut the door with a slam and sank his weight against it, hugging his knees with his arms. There he shook with sobs. And he dried his cheeks, and he cried, and sobbed.

When Keeper Miriethal returned to Irieth bearing the red marks of a hunt, he found the gate to his home open and a crowd gathered outside. He walked through the people quickly and stiffly. They asked him questions: about a boy—A boy? A little one—who was in that room—Where? Up there—hiding—He'd been hiding in that room for the better part of the day.

“I shall go see this boy,” the keeper said. He pushed the heavy gate closed, slowly and silently.

Outside, the crowd lingered until sunset. Then calm fell.

Miriethal stood by the garden pond, his gaze trapped in its shallow depths where a maze of weeds lay blackened by the night. Tashira, darker than darkness, circled around him and around the hole in the ground. She looked at her sire's face. Her sire stared unmoving into the pond, deep in thought.

It had been five long years. Only now was Irieth beginning to resemble a shadow of itself, the memory of the loss fading away. And now. Would they ask the question now? Would they ask about their guardian? Their strength? Their heart? All they had seen was a child, and a child was no guardian. The guardian was will of steel and heart of fire, the mightiest and most adept of Alasians. The power did not belong with the young and untrained. The ruby light had faded, reunited with the flow of the world—lost, it must be sought anew. Miriethal had named this the truth five years ago, and he alone knew otherwise. Except that, now, they had seen the boy.

The following day there was a knock on the gate. Miriethal emerged from within with the look of one who had kept vigil through the night. Outside his home, in the feeble morning light, stood a falyn—a male Alassian—with an old and stern face. The falyn's long hair fell to his feet in thin braids that lay on the ground behind him, fine as a blanket of frost. His voice was taut and bitter. The two spoke for long, the visitor now and then peering behind the keeper's shoulders, through the doors left ajar, and the keeper seemingly untroubled by the intrusion.

That day, Miriethal spoke to anyone who sought him

out, neither denying nor confirming the truth, agreeing only to what had been seen. A boy came out of this home, a boy ran into that room. Had there been a boy? So he had been told. Did the boy live in this home? A boy *had* lived in this home. Who was this boy? A young child, it seemed. Who were his parents? That, he had not been told. He spoke humbly and patiently, and one by one all the visitors were turned away.

The afternoon was beginning to darken, when a furious banging shook the gate. Outside, stood a tall young falyn, his face marked with a thick line of red paint over the eyes. Miriethal met the silent glare with unease, then stood aside to let this falyn in.

Alone in his room, the boy had not eaten or slept since the day before. His father had not tried to come in, but had asked for the door to be open. The door remained closed. He was still afraid, terrified, though not of the people, not since yesterday. At first, between one shameful sob and another, he had realized with horror that in his hasty escape he had left the gate open. He had listened hard for anyone who might come in, but no one had, and returning home, Father had closed the gate. Through the long hours of the night, nothing more had happened. In the morning there had been a coming and going of people, none, however, had gone past his father and entered their home. So he no longer feared the people outside; yet an unexplained dread filled him, and the slightest noise made him gasp with a pounding heart.

When presently, this falyn was let in, the boy at last got out of bed and ran to the door. There he stopped like a fly caught in a web, hands against the wood, heart

beating fast. He listened intently—though not with his ears, for he was too far to hear the words spoken. This falyn’s heart was angry and fierce. His rage roared like the squall before a storm. Suddenly, he yelled, and his voice lashed against the closed door and was muffled.

Curiosity won over the fear. The boy reached for the knob, pulled the door open, and crept to the stairs. He saw below him, in the garden, his father and a stranger deep in argument. Tashira, like a shadow, circled them both with a predator’s pace, slow and deliberate, her big yellow eyes on the stranger.

He was a slim figure with wide shoulders and strong arms, taller than Father by a few inches. The color brown was all about him. Baggy brown trousers that stopped tight at the knees, a dark brown leather jerkin, and a wide brown sash at the waist. Into the sash he carried two black-sheathed swords with polished bronze handles. His hair was pure white, brighter than Father’s chalky tone, and shorter; it was plain instead of braided, and tied in a narrow stream that hung behind his back, brushing his thighs when he moved.

“I will hear none of your riddles,” the stranger was saying. His voice, although irate, was silvery clear. “No more, Keeper. Have you lied to me?”

Father did not reply.

“Is he? Or is he not? Answer me!” His command snapped like the cracking of a whip.

Father averted his gaze a moment, then quietly said, “Forget what you think you have learned, please. None of it must leave these walls. No one can hear of it.”

“I have learned nothing!” barked the stranger. “You have told me nothing. If you want my silence, then give



me the answers I seek. Talk!”

“You must quiet your anger,” Miriethal said. “You must learn to be patient.”

“Why are you doing this to me!” cried the stranger, and the strain in his voice betrayed despair. “I was left with nothing. Now I . . . Why?! Why won’t you answer me? You are cruel. You are hurting me. And I have done you no wrong.”

“I am sorry, young one.”

There was a pause. Silent, unspoken words. Stares.

“If you say nothing, I shall have to ask *him*. Where is he? Where is the boy?”

Miriethal stood silent.

“Then keep your secrets! I will look for him myself.”

The stranger turned, and quick as a shadow, Tashira bounced in his way, growling and hissing, big and brawny and black as pitch darkness, almost as tall as he.

Nimbly the falyn drew a sword and held it between himself and the kaara. Glaring at her with hard rage, he said, slowly so that his words were clear and full of silence, “Do not try to stop me, or I will fight you both. I seek answers, not blood. Yet blood will spill if you demand it.”

But after he had spoken, his hand began to tremble. His grip wavered. His sword fell on the grass with a dull thump. His gaze searched the garden then flicked to the stairs. There, he saw the boy.

He was small and thin, fair-skinned, and with snow-white hair less than an inch long—as is true of all Alassian children his age. But his eyes shone bright red, as none of the children’s do. He was crying silently, his lips pressed together, his brows furrowed, and heavy

tears dripping from his chin.

Without speaking or moving, the faly n watched the boy cry and sob a little, the glow of his eyes slowly fading until they turned white and dull, the power stowed away.

Then the keeper spoke. "He is. But no one must know. I beg of you."

The stranger collected his sword from a bush of white whispers that had flattened beneath its weight, and sheathed it. Again he looked up at the boy. "No one will know," he said. His gaze lingered a moment in scrutiny. Then he turned, and left.

IN THE OPEN KITCHEN, thickly roofed with tangled leafy vines, a small fire crackled in a high circle of gray rocks, casting long shadows on the earthen floor.

"Father? Who was that faly n?"

He was sitting at the oaken table by the fire, looking into a bowl of steaming soup. Before his answer came, he stirred the food four times slowly with a slim white spoon.

"Someone you may one day know as your kin," said his father, "but not today. Today you are my son, and he is no son of mine. Eat your supper. It's getting cold."

He ate obediently, though the dense, orange soup tasted bland to his palate. When the bowl was empty, he said, "I'm sorry, Father." The words came out in an indistinct mumble, so that he was not sure they had been heard.

"Come. It's time to sleep."

Father took him by the hand and led him upstairs to the bigger of the two bedrooms and to the wide cotton bed in which he had not been allowed to sleep for over a

year. Tonight he was allowed again. He cried, and Father held him in his arms until the sobs passed. Sometime after that, he fell asleep.

That night the keeper watched the darkness grow and then brighten again. When at last the morning light flooded the room, he slept, but only until the little one awoke. They got up late and went about their day with a silence and stillness that stayed with them for many days to come.

Then one morning, his father told him, "Tomorrow, we go into the forest."

His mouth fell open in a wide "O", and he did not think to close it for quite some time.

"We leave before dawn, so you will go to sleep early tonight."

He did not sleep that night.

Before the sun rose, he and Father rode on Tashira's back into the deep, unending jungle. Tall tree trunks rushed by them in a blur of brown and green, and the smell of earth, trees, flowers, and wood, filled their senses. The ground and the air were moist and did not dry even as the day went on, for daylight was timid beneath the high jungle canopy.

Everything he saw that day was a marvel. He grinned and giggled until his cheeks hurt and his breath was all out of him, then he grinned some more; and to his delight, Father laughed along with him till his white eyes were bright with tears.

He pointed at things, asked about them, and listened to his father tell him about the tree with smooth white bark, the stream that flowed fast and babbly, the huge

red flower with the white dots that looked as if it might suddenly spring up and begin to walk, and many, many other wonders.

As the light of day began to dim, he kept his eyes from closing for as long as he could, but when twilight came, he slipped into quiet dreams.

In the small room above the garden, Miriethal laid the child in bed and kissed his forehead. Then with a tender smile on his lips, he murmured, "Sweet dreams, Guardian."

The next morning, and for many mornings to come, the boy awoke thrilled with excitement, dreaming of the day when his father would surely say: Tomorrow, we go into the forest. This time, he would make sure to sleep the night before, so that he could be awake when they returned home in the darkness of midnight. He did not ask his father when next the day would come, for that would certainly scare the time further away. Instead he waited, and once and again, his patience was rewarded.

THIS DAY WAS SILENT and hot, he was eight years old. His father was asleep on a blanket of vivid grass by the great riverside, cloaked in a robe of silver chiffon and wrapped in the heat of a sunbeam that shone intrepidly through the green canopy. Father had returned from a long hunt only the day before and was tired. Tashira was with them as she always was when they ventured into the jungle. She, too, was asleep—not because she was tired but because she was a cat and often did just that: she slept.

He was not far, and wide awake. He had climbed a blooming nut tree, and was ten feet above the ground, standing on a cluster of coconut-sized pods and holding

tightly the thick twigs that grew all around the trunk, rough and old near the bark and green and smooth at the tips. The tips were covered in green buds, some of which had opened into big flowers with six red petals and a heart filled with pink and yellow stamens. Between two of these flowers hid the little creature he was chasing after: a red squirrel with black almond eyes, a cream belly, and a tail like a tongue of flame.

“I got you,” he whispered, beaming at it. He stretched out to touch it. The critter hopped past his hand and ran up his arm to his shoulder, then leaped, spread its wing-like arms, glided softly, and dived into the tall grass below.

“Not fair!” he laughed.

He hurried down after it and snooped about in the sea of green. The squirrel re-emerged, standing up on an old tree root. It looked his way with a fat nut in its tiny fingers. He carefully went to crouch near it, and offered his open hands. The squirrel gave him the nut.

“I’m not hungry,” he giggled.

The furry creature sniffed his fingers, then leaned forward. He felt the light pressure of the creature’s gentle touch, its hard nails thin and sharp. He waited very still.

Finally, the squirrel climbed to retrieve the nut and began to nibble it right there on his hands. He held his breath, his cheeks stinging with glee.

The creature paused, listening. It glanced around, its head twitching left and right and back; its tail flickered once. Quick as a heartbeat, it scabbled up his arm and slipped inside his clothes—*Hide!*

He jolted upright. Then he froze. Warm against his belly, the critter shuddered. His own body shivered, but

he held himself still, for the fear he felt was not his own.  
His belly squeaked.

“Hush, little one,” he said inside his clothes. “What scares you?”

The creature kneaded his skin, scratching him with little nails, quivering and sniveling.

He inhaled deeply to ease his own tremors. He looked up and cast the fear out through his breath, clenching his fists. Bracing himself, he brought forth focus to his eyes.

About him the jungle shone and twinkled with life, full of currents and light. The leaves of trees shimmered green around him and above him. High in the sky, the wind blew white and bright, and the sun wove the world red. Down below, the earth sparkled densely with stars, myriads of tiny lives. He looked upon the one essence of all things, and in it, he saw a darkness, a wrongness, a slithering mass of steaming emptiness that swam in the multicolored currents of the river, thirty yards away. He blinked. The darkness leaped from the water, headed for the white brightness of his father’s form.

He waved a hand at it, and slapped it back into the river. Then he sprang forward.

The squirrel’s nails tickled him as the critter scuttled out his clothes to flee the opposite direction.

He kept his eyes on the darkness. He’d wished to cast it all the way beyond the river, but instead he had only managed to shove it back in the water. And now it leaped again, shooting out from the river’s depths as an up-diving falcon. He threw himself at it, arms outstretched, uncaring of the rock that tricked his foot. His mind locked around a frigid emptiness as his chin smacked the ground.

He lay there sniffing soil. The fall had lashed at the nape of his neck, and he'd whacked his teeth together. His hands were open on the ground, palms up. In the air above, his mind held the icy emptiness.

He got to his knees.

Father lay sleeping beside him, unaware of the danger aloft. It was a snake, a pit viper, twenty inches long, flimsy, its round bulging eyes crowned with a crest of scales, its mouth gaping, the fangs drawn out. He could discern the creature's features through the steaming darkness that seeped from its marble-like body. But where he should see the light of living flesh, of a heartbeat, of flowing blood, he saw veins and masses of pulsing blackness. The creature's life was spent, eaten away. It did not think. It neither sensed nor felt the world around it.

He held the snake suspended between parted hands. What was inside it tried to move; he pressed his mind stoutly around it and held it still.

With the fingers of his right hand, he clasped the creature's feeble living essence, with the left, he tugged at the darkness. He wrenched it all out in one vigorous pull, and his hands snapped apart. The snake fell limp on the ground, lying there unmoving, its life force faintly guttering.

The darkness, like a black vapor, tried to dissipate. He closed his hands around it, his fingertips nearly touching. He squeezed it into a dense globe of icy nothingness and watched it. He watched it pulse with the beat of a heart. And he began to feel . . . wrong.

Cold. He felt very cold. His arms had grown heavy; he could hardly hold them up. He caught himself nodding off, and blinked. Tears oozed from his eyes.

“F-Father? Father w-wake up . . .” he sobbed.

His father did not hear him, just as he had not heard him fall down beside him, or the water splashing in the river. His mind was submerged in a deep-weaving sleep.

Despair took him; and in that moment, he heard Tashira’s high-pitched hissing. The kaara crouched in the grass, watching him with piercing eyes, holding back a little, cautious, her teeth bared. She came closer and pressed a wide paw on Miriethal’s chest.

The keeper’s eyes flickered brightly open.

There was a flash of light.

Father’s arms wrapped around him, pulling him into a fast embrace. Relief washed over him.

He wiped his tears against Father’s chest, swallowing his frightened sobs. “I’m . . . cold.”

“I know, child. But have no fear now. The danger has passed.”

He grabbed the dampened fabric of Father’s silvery robe and held on to the embrace. Miriethal pulled back enough to gaze into his eyes. Because he had allowed the power to fade from his sight, he saw his father’s form as it was in the stillness of things—his small eyes white and dull with tiny black pupils, his mouth unsmiling but wrinkled with kindness.

“You did well,” Father told him. “Now lie in the sun for a while. You will soon feel warm.”

Without protest, he lay drowsing in the heat of the sun.

They set out for home well before nightfall, riding fast on Tashira’s back. He did not complain of the early departure—he did not feel like talking, anyway. He



leaned against Father's chest and clung to his strong arm, shielding himself from the cold air that seeped under his clothes. It had never occurred to him that riding on Tashira's back was such a strenuous and uncomfortable thing. By the time they reached home he was chilled to the bone. The day had grown dark, and he felt sick and exhausted.

For the next three days, he ailed with fever. He spent the hours sleeping or listening to his father read the stories of old. When at last he was deemed on the way of recovery—his favorite meal of coconut bread and pumpkin soup devoured as proof of good health—his father sat down solemnly beside him and told him, then, of the nature of darkness.

“The unlife, we call it, although what its true name is, we do not know. It is by curse of knowledge that our people are sworn to do battle against it, and protect the world from its cold grasp. For darkness is the ender of all life.”

Father talked of how, hundreds of centuries in the past, their ancestors had tamed the powers of light, and with them, had secured the Haven from unending night. They had built the city of Irieth very near that passage between this realm and the one beyond, where this evil resides. And ever since then, they had kept watch.

In the silence that followed, he thought for some time. Presently, he asked, “What happened to the darkness I took from the snake?”

“I cast it out of our realm,” his father said, “and shut the doors behind it.”

“Will you teach me?”

“I cannot.”

“Please?”

“I would teach this to you if it were something that you could learn. But you cannot learn this.”

“I can learn! I promise!”

“You are strong,” said Father; “I know your power. You are the guardian. But you cannot cross the borders, and so you cannot cast out darkness. It is beyond your skill. The task falls to the keeper alone.”

He knew his father spoke the truth, because in the presence of the unlife, and for the first time in his life, he had felt defenseless. The memory upset him.

“But I fought it! Alone! I saved you, Father!”

“That you did. You were brave, child. But you must be braver still. You must wield courage even when your power fails you. Your strength must come from your mind, as well as your heart. Never let one rule over the other.”

He pondered his feelings for a while. It was fear he felt beneath the frustration. “What do I do if more darkness comes?” he asked.

“Bring it to me. And I will cleanse the world of its taint.”

“But what if I can’t, Father? What if you’re not with me?”

“Then you must slay it.”

He stared in bewilderment. Father had taught him the value of all living things, Alassians, kaaras, the creatures of the forests, skies, and waters, the plants, trees, and flowers, the grass that crowns the earth and the insects that crawl in it. Slay it, Father said now, slay it—he did not think that darkness could be slain, for it was emptiness, it was coldness—slay it, the creature, slay the

creature it wears.

“The unlife cannot thrive in this world without a living body,” said Father. “A creature infected by it may be slain, and darkness trapped inside it for a time. But not forever. Eventually it will escape the body, and seek a new servant. That is why the Light exists. That is why I am its keeper. I am the vanquisher of darkness. It is my duty to cast the unlife from our realm. And your duty—when you are old enough to take it upon yourself—will be to watch the borders between the worlds, to safeguard the Light, and with it, the life of all things. Now you know.”

“I am old enough,” he said. “I can fight the unlife with you.”

His father smiled, and there was laughter in his heart. He said, “No, child. You are still young. First, you must grow into a strong falyn. Only then will you fight at my side.”

“But I am ready!”

“You are ready to learn how to defend yourself. And that, I will teach you. I will teach you the art of combat.”

An art that to him became a passion.

Father taught him the stances and movements, the foot positions, how to feel for his center and find balance. He was a perseverant student, driven by the rigorous practice. Fighting was a fascinating dance, slow and graceful at times, fast and fierce at others. In the training he found clarity of mind and learned to open his senses far outward, farther than ever before.

And so it was that one sunny day in his thirteenth year, his mind came upon something odd, an indistinct noise, like a buzzing. He was sparring with his father and

became distracted. Dropping his stance, he shone his gaze eastward, where he could see the jungle's living light for miles, a confused blend of colors and movement. He saw no darkness. Yet, what he sensed troubled him.

"Someone comes," he said.

There was a flicker of fear in his father's heart. "How many, and where?"

"Twelve," he counted, "far beyond the great waterfalls."

"Alassians?"

He gave his father a questioning look. "No."

Miriethal, too, gazed to the east, although he would not see past the tree-walls of their garden.

"Father? What are they if not Alassian?"

There was a long silence; then at last, Father said, "Human."

## 2

### THE COMING OF OTHERS

KEEPER MIRIETHAL GATHERED a party of twelve to ride east. The guardian waited at home, sitting cross-legged on the grass facing the pond filled with duckweed and the wide green leaves of water lilies. His gaze was lost on a hollow gray rock which was part of a wall crowned by blooming red bushes. His mind was absent, soaring eastward ahead of the twelve.

Deep in the heart of the Sa'dalia rainforest, human explorers had come upon uncharted waterfalls. The slow and wide Uwano River, which they had followed for miles, thundered down from towering cliffs, foamy white into a pool of glistening water. Overhead, the sky was a half-circle of bright blue, a splinter of daylight in the dark canopy roof.

Laboriously the humans descended to lower ground where the sun shone hot and the grass grew wild and tall. Here they made camp. They erected green tents with roofs firmly stretched and held by tense ropes. They

gathered wood and built a fire inside a ring of flat stones. Well before nightfall, they turned their gazes to the west where twelve pale figures emerged from the jungle shade, noiselessly as ghosts.

The humans jumped to their feet bracing guns, shouting and baying. The pale jungle people stood in a silent line and watched them.

Keeper Miriethal studied the intruders through eyes hard and careful. He had seen humans once before, though not these humans. He had seen simple creatures, half-naked and nomadic. These in front of him now, were men and women from a far more advanced society. Their tools were fine and intricate: big packs with strings and buckles, perfectly shaped flasks and bottles, neatly-built tents. They wore identical garments in brown and green blotches: long trousers, long-sleeved tops, vests covered in pockets, small hats, and thick boots.

Unlike the humans of nearly two thousand years ago, who had looked like one people, these humans had skins of every shade, from fair to very dark, and their hair was brown, blond, red, or black. They each held a bulky black tool—a weapon—with tiny metal parts, a small handle, and a long tube whose hollow end was aimed at Miriethal and his people.

The humans scanned the jungle people from behind the protection of their guns. Alien creatures stood before them, ghastly-pale, with long white hair and monstrous eyes that had no iris but only the small pupil. They wore loose-fitting clothes from another era, and each of them bore weapons. Slim wooden longbows, quivers filled

with feathered arrows, and sheathed swords tucked into sashes at the waist. One of them spoke first. From the center of the line, he said in their foreign tongue, «Nuhina liavn te, alannen.»

«We come in peace!» replied one of the soldiers.

Silence.

«Sélia,» said the same pale one, bowing his head slightly. «Miriethal se'nuyhiéleh.»

«We're friends!» cried the same soldier, gazing from over the barrel of his gun. «You understand?»

A longer silence.

The soldier, a stern weathered man, searched his comrades. His eyes settled on a young woman with deep ebony skin and kinky black hair. He said to her, «Talk to them.»

«Me?» The woman gawked.

«Now!»

«Yes, sir!» She lowered her gun and addressed the jungle people, projecting her voice, a hand to her chest. «I . . . aaam . . . Loomaa,» she said.

The pale people exchanged silent glances. Someone among the soldiers sniggered. Then a pale hand rose, copying Loma's gesture.

«I . . . am . . . Tawori,» said a pale male at one end of the line.

Loma stared. «We come in peace,» she blurted.

The pale one shook his head.

«Keep talking,» encouraged the weathered soldier.

«Uh . . . This . . . » said Loma, «is Sergeant Jonson.» She indicated the man, who lowered his gun and signaled the others to do the same. Loma continued, «This . . . is Andra. And Devid. Hanah . . .» She named all twelve

soldiers, then looked at the one called Tawori and waited hopefully.

The pale one turned to his companions. He spoke in a blur of soft sounds. «Ashe nur, ihn, nimvn eth luhila?»

The white eerie gazes went in unison to the person who stood in the center of the line and who had spoken first. He nodded.

Tawori walked to him. «This . . . is . . . Miriethal Alaire,» he said. Then from left to right he named the others one by one from Theidrin and Aruhin, to Omoïn and at last Gwendier. They each nodded as they heard their name.

«A pleasure to meet you,» said Sergeant Jonson.

The pale one refocused his attention on him, but did not reply.

«Come,» said the sergeant, «sit at the fire. Make space for them, make space.»

The soldiers moved back, clearing the area around the fireplace. The pale people didn't move.

«Sit down, please. Come,» repeated the man, beckoning.

This time the pale one walked forward, confidently and with the bearing of a warrior treading among warriors. His companions followed him. He stopped and they stopped, across the fire from the humans. They did not sit.

«Do you live around here?»

No reply.

«We came a long way,» continued the sergeant.

The pale one shifted his silent gaze back to Loma, and the woman tensed.

«We . . . come from Terica,» she said, and waved



vaguely to the east.

«And you?» asked the sergeant, gesturing for the pale one to speak.

Tawori looked at him, and said, «Lur ven'gornvn nuhina tisa veiahm.»

Beside him, Miriethal Alaire nodded.

«We . . .» said Tawori, «come . . . from Irieth.» He pointed westward.

«We came here for you,» the sergeant said, extending his open hands. His gesture was met with a frown. «We came to meet with you.»

At that, the pale one cast a sharp glance about him, as if noticing only now the other soldiers standing around him in the firelight. He said, «Lur dedvn veiahm pre isi nuhina.»

His companions all began to speak at once. They chattered over one another like a flock of hungry seagulls, all but Miriethal Alaire—he was quiet, his gaze moving slowly from one soldier to the next. After some time, he spoke; then the others fell silent.

That day and long through the night, the pale people of the deep jungle sat with the humans from a land far away, learning of their culture and their journey. When they parted ways, long after nightfall, the woods were pitch black.

«We come back,» Tawori told the soldiers. «You wait. Here. After tomorrow.»

The pale ones called to the night, and something, or some things, in the trees beyond the fire-lit circle moved with rustling noises. Eyes burned in the dark. The Alasians walked into the trees, and were gone.

. . .

IN THE MORNING, the boy set out breakfast on the kitchen table: dried mango, boiled goose eggs, and coconut flatbread. By the time his father came into the kitchen—little more than a closed fireplace and a wide wooden table with four chairs—the eggs and bread had cooled.

“What of the humans, Father?”

Miriethal slumped into a chair and began to peel an egg. “They have come looking for us and our city,” he replied.

“Will they find it?”

“That is yet to be decided.”

He watched Father eat his egg then reach for a piece of dried mango, change his mind and take instead another egg.

“Are they to be feared?”

“I should ask *you* that question,” Father said. “You hear their hearts, whereas I only hear their words, and I do not understand their meaning.” He chuckled, shaking his head, and cracked the eggshell on the table with a knock.

He had already eaten while Father slept, but the taste of dried mango was still sweet on his tongue. He took a slice and chewed it absentmindedly. He had been thinking hard on his own question, but had found no answer. The humans’ hearts and minds were unfamiliar to him and unsettling. All the previous day and again this morning, he had listened to them and still was puzzled. At first, he had heard a bitterness, which he had thought was mistrust, then he had felt a distinct richness, like satisfaction. But everything was clouded in a chaos of fast-shifting emotions; the constant buzzing of it was dizzying.

“I fear what I don’t understand,” he said when Father

was leaving.

“So do we all,” Miriethal replied.

That day, the keeper summoned a council of the people. A crowd of hundreds gathered to hear him talk. He stood before the Temple of Congruence, at the foot of moss-covered stairs, low easy stone steps flanked by square granite poles. Behind him was a gateway, a stout square arch of rock toppled with dense moss over which sat two great stones shaped like drops. On them were carved runes of the ancient tongue: *ire*, the light; and *anwi*, the equilibrium. Past the gateway, and to the left and right of the stairs, were broad trees, their bark rough and ancient. Round boulders circled each tree, and flat even earth lay about them. Everything was blanketed in green and white moss. This was a place of meditation, learning, and training. Here, the keeper spoke of the coming of humans.

Not for the first time a group of nomads or lost travelers had found their way to the city of Irieth and learned of its people. Alassian history was scarred by such occurrences. The race of Man was young and short-lived, ruled by passing desires, and prone to extremes. Once, the humans would exalt the Alassians as gods, once, they would wage war on them with swords and shields. The occasion of their latest coming was most troubling. A decision must be made as to whether these humans should be welcomed or turned away.

From a place of silence, sitting in the grass near a quiet pond, the guardian heeded the council. Throughout this day and the one that followed, he listened to the worries and discord of the people, their hopes and curiosity, until

the keeper with his party rode to the far waterfalls, where he welcomed the humans into the city.

In the solitary confines of his home, the guardian listened to the humans' astonishment at the sight of Irieth and its inhabitants, and in the days that followed, he kept a watchful eye.

The Alassians found their visitors to be of great interest. Little they resembled the primitive species remembered by some. They carried with them knowledge of the faraway world, of lands unseen by the Alassians for millennia, and possessed tools that replicated images and sounds, voices of things and people from those far-lands. They showed the Alassians a world they had long forsaken and forgotten.

But while the Alassians learned of the humans, their technology, and their lands, so too, the humans of those far-lands were learning of the Alassians, their strange city, their uncanny appearance, and their centuries-long lives. And they, if only by intuition, began to glimpse a mystery surrounding these pale jungle people, an unseen mysticism that filled their being and their everyday life. It was in the way they walked, in the way they spoke, and in how they communed with the flora and fauna of their habitat. For when the Alassians spoke to wild animals, these seemed to listen, and when the wind shook the leaves of tall trees, its voice appeared to answer them.

IT WAS THE TENTH night since the coming of the humans when the guardian awoke from sleep gasping for air. He sat up trembling, feverish and cold. The bed sheets, bright in his Alassian night sight, were wet with sweat. A dreadful fear was in his heart and he thought perhaps a dream

had caused him distress, but thinking hard, he could not remember to have been dreaming. When at last his drowsiness dissipated, he remembered the humans.

He fixed his gaze on the wall where a knot in the wood drew a darker shade in the light blue tinge of his night vision. He silenced his mind and let his consciousness seep out of his body and into the world, outside his room, outside his home, to the south, a mile or so through Irieth, to the house where the humans had been lodged. There, he found the unmistakable sharpness of fear. Dread. Despair. Heavy and suffocating grievance. The humans waited, awake in the night. What were they waiting for?

He threw off the sheets and barged out of his room. The wooden floor felt warm beneath his bare feet. Cold night air snatched at his naked torso.

He banged on his father's door shouting, "Father? Wake up! Wake up, Father!"

The door swung open. "What is it?"

Father stood dressed in his day clothes, his ivory-sheathed sword secured at the waist, his robe creased, and his face showing signs of slumber.

"The humans! They fear for their lives!"

Father made no reply; his mind was slow with sleep.

"They are waiting! Awake. All of them. I think—" He shone his gaze to the sky, and in the distance he saw an object, dark in the flow of the world's energies. His eyes could not glimpse the object per se, for it was too far, but he discerned its shadow in the force that propelled it forward, a force that gleamed bright as fire, leaving behind a vaporous wake that far, and farther, dissipated into darkness.

“Something comes,” he said. “I don’t know what it is. It’s falling toward us.”

Miriethal stepped onto the stairs, from where he could look at the night sky.

“Father, I think that’s what the humans fear.”

“I see a falling star.”

“It’s not a star.”

For an instant an overwhelming fear gripped both their bodies. Then it was gone, suppressed by his father’s will. “Come with me!”

They ran down the spiral staircase, stopping near the quiet pond at the garden’s heart where the sky was open and vast.

“You must share the guardian’s power with me” said Father, “and with as many Alassians as you can. Those who are adept will know how to use it to defend themselves and others. I will do the same and give them my protection, but you must open the way for me.”

He looked at his father, confused. “What—”

“There is no time! Do as I do.”

Through the guardian sight, he watched as a thread of light stretched from his father’s belly and reached out to him, white, unwavering, and pure—his father’s light, the keeper’s light. Heat filled him from within as the power wholly surrounded his body, a blanket against the chill of the night.

“Hurry, child!”

He understood what was asked of him, only he had to find a way to do it.

He held the inner flow of his life force steady, as his father had done, and reached deep within himself for the essence of his being, the core of the guardian’s power. He

began to pull it outward. At once he felt sick. His instincts screamed at him to stop, to let go, let the essence fall back where it belonged. He was hurting himself.

Yet his father's gaze was upon him, strong with determination. He must do what was asked of him, because now, in this time of need, he was the guardian, and that who stood in front of him requesting his aid did not do so as his father but as the keeper of the world's light.

He did not understand what danger was upon them, but that mattered not. He was called to fulfill his duty, and this he would do.

In his mind he envisioned the essence of his being take shape in a thread of red light. He willed it to spiral around the white strand that joined him with his father. Then his own ruby essence enveloped Father's body, and through it the keeper's light pierced here and there like beams of moonlight.

Father's eyes shone red. "Yes," he said gazing at the sky, "now follow my light." At once, a myriad of white rays stretched from Father's luminous form and went in all directions. Fast, far, and sure. They sought Alassians in the city, touching and surrounding them with light and with power. They went farther and farther. And the city began to awaken.

He stared at his father in awe. Long had he known Father's power to be great, but never had he imagined such manifestation of mastery and intensity. Not only did Father wield the keeper's light with skill, but while they shared in each other's essence, he was able to look at the flow of the world through red shining eyes and open his senses to all of Irieth. He heard in his father's mind the

chorus of countless Alassians, and in his heart felt their distress.

He understood, now, his own insignificance. What was the mere decade of his young life compared to his father's long centuries of wisdom and training?

And yet the guardian's power had been entrusted to him and him alone. Akihalla, the guardian who had preceded him, had chosen him among all people to protect the world at the keeper's side. This he would do even in his inferiority, in his childhood inadequacy. He would prove his worthiness. He would be the Guardian. He would protect Irieth.

He began to stretch his ruby essence in the wake of his father's light, but found he could not follow all threads by sight—they were too many and went too far. He shut his eyes and focused on the hearts and minds of the people, willing his essence to them with every fiber of his being. The guardian's power pierced him through a thousand times, straining in all directions. He groaned and gasped, but kept at the task. One after another, he enveloped all Alassians in his radiance.

Then the entire city was under his and his father's protection.

"Ready yourself," said Father.

He opened his eyes.

The world thundered with a deafening blast. Almighty currents came crashing from east to west, brighter than the sun and blinding to the eyes of the living. Through the guardian sight he watched the flow of energies hasten by. He saw the earth dig underneath his feet and the trunks of ancient trees shred like desiccated leaves. Splinters spewed into the air like water from hulking buckets.



Rocks and boulders flew up in the sky and shattered one another like pottery.

He pushed against the mighty forces and, in them, split an opening where he and his father stood bent against havoc. It took all his strength and concentration to do so, and to keep the tear in place around them. The debris of the physical world, he moved aside. Some slipped through his guard, his father caught it. Some they both missed, it stabbed their flesh, digging deep and sharp. A scorching heat washed over everything. It burned everything. It hazed the sight. It set fire to their lungs. Limbs of it slipped past his will and brushed against his flesh, hollowing the fabric of his trousers. They did not burn him, for the keeper's shield was at work.

In the midst of chaos a new awareness awoke in him. While he fought the harmful energies, he learned of a falynd who was on the verge of losing his own battle. He saw through his own eyes what the falynd's eyes saw, and it was, then, as though he were in two places at once. Instinct guided him. Without hesitation he subdued the falynd's life force, bound it to his own will, and used it to shape the world of chaos. He pushed against the currents; he caught the debris before it stabbed the living body; he protected the life.

He sensed other frightened hearts, overwhelmed minds, and came to their aid, unbound and unyielding. Time stretched endlessly as he battled on. Then the thrusting force ceased.

The heat vanished. Silence lay still.

Fire rose from the earth with the violence of a storm.

He let his essence withdraw. It snapped back and

struck him with a blow to the stomach.

He dropped on all fours, vomiting a mouthful of bile, coughing, and gasping for air. When the fit passed, he fought to quell his panting and trembling. His body hurt as if it were scraped all over. His strength was spent. The light faded from his sight and he saw scarlet blood stream down his arms. Thick drops dribbled from his face and chest, dousing the ground beneath him. All he could sense now was pain. Great, overwhelming pain.

He shut his eyes and concentrated on breathing, gathering his life force, shaping it into threads of vitality in his belly. Wearily and with great effort, he sent them prodding into the far reaches of his body. His flesh prickled and heated with healing fever. The ringing in his ears eased, and he heard the sputtering and whooshing of fire.

The bleeding stopped, then he sank back on his heels.

His father was kneeling a step away from him, covered in blood, his eyes closed in concentration and his breathing puffing with effort.

He wanted to reach for him, help him heal, but he couldn't. His body wouldn't move.

Around them were ash, cinder, and fire. Nothing stood where it had once existed. Their home was a deformed ring of blazing debris. There was no shape to it but for a hollow where they had withstood the forces of chaos. The soil was scorched black. There was no water left in the pond—there was no pond left in the earth. The sky above was dense with smoke.

From a fiery pile of rubble came a movement and a growl. Tashira emerged with her fur matted with dirt and blood. He watched her stupidly as she plodded to Mirie-thal and licked his cheek once with her wide tongue. She

began cleaning her wounds. She licked her right front paw. With it she cleaned her muzzle and ears. She licked her belly thoroughly. Then she licked her left front paw. She went on licking and washing, and her fur slowly turned black. Suddenly her snout snapped toward the sky, and she snarled.

There was a swooshing sound, like a flapping of vast wings.

Black and sharp through the smoke's haze, a powerful body took shape, two legs thick and muscly, four hooked talons on each foot. It flew on bat-like wings, long, wide, and with scales like thorns. The neck was serpentine and rugged, the face like that of a snake or a crocodile. It had long spikes and horns bent back. Thick membranes stretched between the spikes. It flew downward, writhing a little in the air, as an eel would in water. It was very near already.

It landed atop the circle of burning detritus and crouched forward on its taloned wings. Even so shrunk, it loomed enormously. It turned its neck to one side and watched through a shadowed black eye.

"Lenthieh?" came Father's voice.

Almost in reply, a dark figure leaped from the creature's back, light and agile, a cascade of long white hair dancing with it, waving behind a black robe and stroking the ground. A second figure followed, heavier, slower, less graceful. Both dashed forward.

He had not moved, still sitting on his heels, puzzled by the apparition. Father's grip seized his arm and snatched him onto his feet and to the side. He heard the clanging of metal against metal and the sliding of blade against blade. He bumped against his father's back and tripped;

then the steely grip shoved him face-first into a pile of waste and ash, and lost him. He yelped as hot dry dirt scorched him.

He scuffled blindly out of it. Grains of dust burned his eyes and forced him to blink, and squint, and peer half-blind at his father, and the black-clothed stranger, and the winged creature, and—where had the second figure gone?

He saw Tashira bite and tear at the ground beneath her.

Father slipped and reeled backward. The stranger pressed after him. They paused, immobile, Father almost kneeling, the stranger towering above him. It was a falyn—that much he could discern despite the burning tears blurring his vision. He was muttering something. His voice, sharp and rough, echoed in the vastness with a chanting, hypnotic rhythm that was ominous to hear. All else had fallen silent, as though the world awaited answer.

In that stillness, Father spoke words of the ancient tongue. His voice rang loud and bright. “Nuykaara! Fàiwon’nàlanwih ônnihimmara!”

Tashira’s roar crashed like ocean waves. She moved like wind, rushing past Father and the stranger, and bouncing to where he half-sat on one foot, baffled and slow, unable to do anything but watch the fight take place around him. She bumped her snout against him, and he floundered forward, catching himself with unsteady hands on the ground.

“Go with her!” shouted Father.

All he could do was blink back at him.

“Redien! Go with Tashira!”

He turned his gaze to the kaara. She had bent her legs, her belly on the ground. He climbed onto her back and squeezed his thighs around her flanks. At once she sprang up. Fast and slick, she climbed over the wall of burning rubble and wood, down the other side, away from the battle, and into blazing desolation. She ran.

Fire and smoke burned his eyes and filled his lungs with fitful coughing. Trees rushed by—broken, bent, turned to cinder on one side and to flame on the other; they crackled, snapped, came crashing down. Leaves of ash fell like hot snow in a blizzard.

He put his arms up to shield his eyes and mouth. The wind howled hot in his ears.

A sudden pain in his abdomen squeezed the breath out of him. The echo of a scream stabbed at his mind with the sharpness of a spear, wrenching his vision black. He bent over, pressing his face in Tashira's fur, clinging to her with one hand, and with the other clasping his belly where a searing pain burned him from within. He panted, slobbering in the dark.

Father's anguished cry wailed on, and on.

He screamed along with it.

Stop! he thought. Turn back! Turn back!

But Tashira kept on running. She kept running.

He kept on screaming, screaming. Screaming.

Until it all ended.

He drew a lungful of smoke. He coughed it out.

There was silence. In his mind there was silence. Emptiness. In his heart there was a hollow. Death. There was death. He was dead. Abandoned. He had abandoned him. Left him to die. He was running away. Not turning back. Not doing anything. Not knowing anything. Not

seeing where he was going. He was empty. Full of cowardice. He was weak. He was nothing. He was dead.

He was no longer aware of the passing of time. He did not notice the coming of rain. When Tashira staggered and collapsed, he made no effort to stop himself from falling along with her. She did not get up. He did not get up.

# 3

## UNDONE

HE STARED AT HIS left hand in the short grass. It was daytime, and all was silent. He was flat on his stomach on soggy turf. The right side of his face had sunk in mud, and his nose was full with the odor of it, a pungent, acrid smell—although perhaps it was the smell of the air. There was something in the air—or was it in his throat and lungs? Something that tightened his breathing.

The mud was cold. He felt cold. There were raindrops on the back of his hand.

He stirred. The fabric of his trousers stuck to him, soaked and heavy. His right arm was pinned down by a weight; when he tried to move it, he couldn't. But the left arm, the one he looked at, he could move. He dragged it slowly toward him and propped himself over it enough to pull his knees under. He felt utterly exhausted and had to pause to catch his breath. He panted, pressing his forehead in the mud. When his breathing eased he looked to his right and saw Tashira, her head resting on his

forearm, her mouth ajar, her eyes open and still.

“T-Tash—”

He stroked her damp fur, and his hand came back red with her blood.

“T-Tashi—” He tried to call her name, but the word would not come out. She lay still. He sobbed and shuddered closer, his face in her wet coat, his weight over hers and his arm crushed beneath them both.

He shook her. “Tashira!” he called.

She didn’t move.

“Tashira! Tashira!” he sobbed. He won his arm free of her weight so he could better shake her awake. He called her name again. She did not answer. She was dead. Her eyes looked at him and did not see him. She did not move except from his shaking of her, which stirred her only faintly. Her mouth lay open, the tongue out on the grass.

He thought how foolish he was. How foolish! He placed both hands on her body and called her life force to his will. But there was no life to obey his command. So he poured his own energies into her. He could heal her if he healed her wounds, if he healed her body. If only he could heal her body, if he were strong enough. If he could bring her back, if he could—

He collapsed over her cold body and sobbed helplessly, uselessly.

The wind howled over him.

When he came back to awareness, he was drooped over Tashira’s body and breathing shallowly.

He was hungry, and felt sick.

His legs threatened to give in, but he managed to stand.



Around him was a small glade encircled by tall half-charred trees the leaves of which were scarce and blackened. Dense, gray fog filled the sky, and the gleam of day pierced through, casting shadows over the sodden grass. He did not know this glade; he had not been here before.

A gush of wind brushed the tree branches, carrying the niff of burnt wood and a smell of decay. He shivered. His body was stiff and seized by tremors.

He hugged himself, but found no comfort in his own arms, wet with mud and blood, the blood of Tashira.

He looked down at her, she looked up at him.

It was a long while later when he turned his gaze away from her dead yellow eyes. He watched the jungle loom with grayness. The branches of the trees were half naked and sick, and when the wind blew, they moaned. He staggered forward. One step after the other the mud swallowed his feet in loud gulps. He reached the trees, where the earth turned hard and dense with roots. Sticks and leaves and little plants bent and cracked beneath the soles of his feet.

He treaded on warily over no path and in no particular direction. He was going nowhere he knew, and did not know why he was going there. He was going somewhere, somewhere that wasn't here.

He stumbled, and recovered. He stumbled and fell. He got up, and kept on walking. His labored breathing was all he could hear—Why was it all he could hear?

He stopped to listen.

His breathing quieted slowly. Then he heard silence. Dead silence.

He hugged himself in his bruised arms, shifting his

gaze to the world of energies. He could not quite see. His vision was blurry, and he was weak, hungry. The cold had eaten his strength away, and the long walk, and the run, and before that the explosion, the light, the heat, the debris. The black creature, and the strangers, and . . . his father . . . his father was . . . was he—No. He had not seen what had happened, only felt it. He'd felt his suffering, so terrible, and his cries and fear . . . the anguish. Then it had all stopped. All at once. He remembered that. He was sure he remembered that. Unless . . . unless he remembered wrong. Maybe he'd lost consciousness—he had done that a lot in the last . . . hour, was it? Had it been hours? Or maybe . . . maybe he'd gone too far to hear him . . . Perhaps he should go back. Yes, go back. But which way was back?

He had been walking away from Irieth, he'd thought, though perhaps that wasn't true. Perhaps he had been headed toward it after all, toward the battle. Maybe his father and the falyrn were still fighting. If he hurried, he could do something. But which way? Which way? Which way!

He did not know this place, this empty place, this deathly place. There was no one here, not even animals, gone, all gone. Maybe they were all dead, all dead like Tashira, like his father. Dead. They were all dead.

His legs gave way and he fell to his knees. What little power had brightened his sight, now faded. The light of day had waned. The trees crowded about him, black and naked, like grasping hands in the fog. The jungle was ill. The day was ill. Maybe the world was dying. What was he to do? He was lost and alone.

He tried to get up but his legs wouldn't hold him. His

body was trembling. No matter how tightly he hugged himself, it kept trembling and shivering. He had found no food and no water although he had walked a great distance; slowly, but he was sure that he had walked a great distance, heading away from Irieth or maybe toward it—he wasn't sure of that.

His head ached, and he was hungry. Painfully, he crawled to an old tree with wide, fanned out roots, which offered little protection from the biting cold. He curled into a ball with his back against the trunk, and listened to his own weak whimpers, like a lost pup without hope, bound to die alone, helpless in the growing gloom of dusk.

When he opened his eyes it was night. The trees, the leaves, and the ground were a dark shadowy-gray tinged with yellow and blue; the air was a whitish murk. His heart beat fast, and he was panting. He was afraid. Something had woken him.

He sat up and stretched his inner senses, listening. There were six—no, seven of them. One was the falyin his father had fought. He recognized him by the malice in his mind and the hunger in his heart. The other six he'd never heard before; they were like Alassians, but wrong.

He cowered against the tree, making himself small. If he hid and didn't move, he would make it harder for them to find him—because they were here to find him. He had no doubt about that. He knew what they were after; it was obvious.

He had understood a long while back. Thirteen years was a long time to be kept hidden from the world and be lied about why. One day he'd seen it clearly, as though a

blindfold had been lifted from his eyes. He had never spoken of the matter, because he remembered too well the day he had disobeyed his father, the fear and misery he'd caused. He'd had no wish to bring those feelings back. So he had kept his knowledge to himself, pretending not to know. But he did know. And now, his father's most dreaded fear had come true at last. It was very near.

A screech filled the silence, making him start. He pressed his back harder against the tree, feeling the rough bark pry his bones. He heard wood snapping.

Something was nearby, something big and clumsy that made noise in the undergrowth. Yet he sensed no creature close by; and still he heard it sniffing, like wind rasping in a cave. There was a thudding, heavy steps, more snapping higher up in the trees, another screech. Something slammed down near him. He did not look at it, but sprang up and ran, bolting left and right through the trees. A thump beat the air out of him and hurled him forward chest first, his feet gone from beneath him. He plummeted to the ground blind with pain, his body frozen. With a desperate effort he stirred his focus to the pain. There was something cold, metal, a sharp point, a shaft—an arrow, stuck in his chest. It had gone a few inches in, pierced a lung, and cracked a rib. He dared not to breathe. He begged his life force to gather at the wound, to form into a sphere of energy and heal him. But the flesh could not mend while the weapon was inside him. He couldn't make his body move. His consciousness was slipping away.

A weight slumped on his lower back and crushed him awake. He drew in air; with it came a stench of death that filled his throat and nose. He saw dark-green scales, a

jagged nostril, and a bloody black eye staring at him at arm's reach. The draconic creature blew out foul air and made a low grating purr.

He heard a voice speak, but the words were swallowed up by shrieks. The beast snapped its head outside his vision, and the weight lifted from over him. Hands seized him and bound his wrists behind his back. Then the arrow was jerked out of him, and he screamed and forced himself to breathe through the pain.

He was left lying on the ground, facing down. The globe of energy he had assembled stopped the bleeding. His flesh heated, mending slowly.

The falyn, the enemy of his father, had begun chanting a droning rhythm. His voice, barely a murmur, shook with power, reverberating beyond the audible. Over his own struggling and panting he could not make out the words. Wrestling the ropes that bound him, his forehead kissing the ground, little by little he got to his knees.

Then the falyn said loudly and very clearly, "Ickh akaenn'ahk ishieh uwa ek'anmah. Ickh akhbenn'ahk ingnah'ihk. Ackh ekka u ishjish'ehk!"

There was a silence. A deadened thump. Then a blood-chilling bellow.

He straightened himself up and half turned, only to be trampled belly up with his arms crushed beneath him. A wide, heavy creature shuddered and slobbered on top of him in a frenzy. Its slimy secretions stung him, burned him. A spasm clutched his gut, and he gulped in air as fire flooded his body. The agony seared at his navel, going deeper, sinking inside him, widening a hole. His very essence jerked and warped, writhing him, mangling him, while life was sucked out of him.

His father's scream echoed in his ears, but it was his own voice howling now. Loudly and jarringly it screamed, and wailed, until his own cry was all he could hear. And then he could hear nothing at all.

Silence.

Darkness.

A presence in his mind.

He opened his eyes and for an instant saw his father's face above him, the high canopy of sickened leaves looming overhead.

"Stubborn little leech!"

It was not his father.

The stranger crouched over him, looking down on him, eyes filled with hatred, hair hanging like drapes at the sides of his face. With both hands he was pressing his head into the ground, pinning him down. And through that touch the faly'n's mind was entering into his.

He urged his life force to brighten his sight and he saw the keeper's light glow, white and strong, within the faly'n's form.

Grief drowned him.

In sudden desperation he pushed against the light.

"I will break you!" the faly'n yelled, his face full of anger, the teeth bared and the nose wrinkled. "I will crush you! I will leave nothing of you! You will be nothing! NOTHING!"

A wave crashed through his mind. He tried to stop it, but it forged ahead growing oppressively, spreading like rot, stabbing everywhere, ruling him. His nose filled with blood. Heat leaked from his nostrils and ran down his cheeks to his ears. His tongue bathed in thick, bitter bodily fluids. His breath drew gore into his lungs, choking

him. He could not breathe. He could not think. He could not see.

Twisted things raced before his eyes. He did not trust them to be real. Images and sounds took shape in fast succession. He heard his father's voice and saw his kind, dimpled face turn into a grimace, screaming in agony and begging for him to stay, to not abandon him. He wondered whether what he saw was real. He thought it was a dream. It was a nightmare. But it was real. It happened as it had happened before. It hurt him as it had hurt him before. He died. And his father died. Yet they both lived. His father laughed and his face shifted, becoming the glowering face of a stranger bent over him, eyes shining red. The eyes had the guardian's power, and as they watched him, they scorched him from the inside out. Then he awoke.

He was lying on the ground with his hands tied behind his back and his feet bound together. His father kneeled beside him, looking down, a grin on his face, a blackened hand descending to rest, hot, on his naked belly, and it slid inside, resolute and unstoppable, going all in, and the fire made him scream.

He cried out in terror, but there was a gag in his mouth, so he heard only a muffled sound. He was awake, and everything was black. Cold and darkness pressed around him. His arms hurt; he was slumped over them supine. His breath came in labored heaves. For a while he listened to his breathing and the silence in between. He was alone. Alone with his hunger, his thirst, his pain, the cold, the darkness. He could see only darkness.

He waited.

When he thought nothing was going to happen, he

tried to turn to one side so that he might relieve the pain in his arms and breathe more easily. The irons at his feet made this an arduous task. It seemed his whole body was covered in scabs, and the more he stirred, the more the wounds reopened and burned. The hurt made him mewl through the thick cloth in his mouth. At long last he managed to roll to one side. By then his nose was stuffed with snot, which made it somewhat harder to breathe, but it was less painful this way, for a moment. Then his arms began to prick and burn so hard that he had to lash out kicking and screaming and knocking his head on the floor.

When the torment eased, he lay still, panting through his wheezing nose and with a hot sore on his temple.

He did not know how long he lay alone, but it seemed a very long time. He fell asleep and had nightmares. They were the same nightmares as before. When he woke, he was biting hard on the gag and the right side of his body, the side he lay on, hurt badly. He didn't sleep after that.

He began to feel thirst above everything else. Water was all he could think about.

Then they came out of nowhere. He did not sense their approach or hear their steps; he could not see them in the dark. They removed his gag and drowned his mouth with water. He tried to drink, but they poured too much too quickly, choking him. He coughed, and that displeased them. They smacked his face, then gave him more water. He was careful not to cough, nearly ran out of breath, gasping when it was over. He was thankful for the water and thankful that it was over. Before he could speak, they stuffed his mouth with something like sand. It was most likely food—he wasn't entirely sure. He tried to swallow



it; he choked; they beat him on the nose. It hurt and bled. He swallowed the blood, and the sand-that-was-food with it.

After he'd drunk and eaten, they forced the gag back into his mouth and left him alone. He lay on his back as they had left him, afraid they might still be watching. When after long, nothing happened, he toiled to turn to one side. After a while he succeeded. Eventually he fell asleep. He awoke screaming in the gag, with nightmares racing through his mind.

His body shivered in the cold.

He crawled over the stone floor—it must be stone, for it was smooth, hard, and cold. Too soon he found a wall, and sat up with his back against it.

When his buttocks ached, he lay down again.

Like so, the days passed. In the dark there was nothing to see and nothing to hear. His eyes were blind and his other senses were deaf. His focus was sick and would not obey his will—he had not much of that, in truth, will. There was something in the darkness, something hefty and intrusive. It confused his mind; it made him see and hear things that weren't there—because there was nothing there. There was the floor, six square feet of it, give or take. There were four walls, tall enough for him to stand; but with the chains at his feet he could take only a step or two, and very short ones. Then there was a metal door that opened only when they came to give him food and water and to beat him if he coughed or tried to speak, and sometimes when he did neither. At first he thought they might eventually stop coming, and let him die. He spent the hours pondering whether he'd rather they never returned. But whenever he felt he was closing in on an

answer, the thirst would take his mind; then he would think only of water. They always returned, but never before the thirst had dried his thoughts. In time he stopped wondering if they would come again: he knew they would. It was one of the few things he knew, the others being darkness, cold, hunger, thirst, pain, and the nightmares. He had countless of those, and they were all alike. He died in them; and sometimes he watched others die too—like this faly, whom he thought he knew. He had chalky-white braids, thick and long to his feet; his mouth had deep laugh lines, though he never smiled, and he never spoke. There was something about him, a light of sorts. This faly must be lost in the darkness just as he was, and perhaps, one day they would find one another. One day, perhaps, they would emerge from this place of darkness and meet. There was no harm in dreaming of the day, was there? But it never seemed to come, the day of his freedom. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. Yet, he thought, time could not hold still forever. Something must happen, something other than hunger, or pain, or nightmare. There sure must be something else besides those things. A light, perhaps. At times he remembered a round yellow light. He did not know what this was but he remembered the heat that emanated from it, remembered his body bathed in its heat. Yet his body had never felt warmth, and his eyes had never seen anything other than darkness. Still, he remembered the light. He remembered the warmth.

AT THE EDGE OF the Sa'dalia rainforest in the far north of Sa'dar and a thousand miles from Irieth, lies a vast cave with cold tunnels, a dungeon under that mountain the

Alassians call Seligor and the human people of Sa'dar call Mount Valdu, for it is a mountain with jagged naked peaks that pierce the dry sky.

When the Alassian War began, the Sa'dari were the first to be caught in the conflict. The Alassians emerged from the Sa'dalian jungle like a tidal wave. They came to kill and burn all that was human: the population, the farmlands, the cities. For hundreds of miles they went unhindered until the human army met them on the plains of Ka'len, and it seemed, there, that the pale jungle people would meet their end. They retreated back under cover of the trees. But from the jungle, then, came swarms of monstrous demons, beasts unknown to humankind, frenzied horrors of brutality. With them came darkness and desolation, a disease of the mind. The humans called it a weapon of mass destruction, but the Alassians know it as the unlife. It is an evil that dwells in a realm beyond, beyond doors that near Irieth had been guarded for millennia, doors that had now been torn asunder by the Alassians' new leader, Lenthieh, he who wields the Light.

Yet there were those among the Alassians who would not forsake their sworn duty to safeguard life against the powers of darkness. They would not serve this new keeper on a path of violence. Instead, they sought peace with the humans, and by their own people they were marked as traitors. Much occurred between these Alassians and the humans before trust came to be and an alliance was formed.

It was the Alliance of Ydalon that at last brought light deep underground in the belly of Mount Valdu. In a small, dark cell, a young Alassian was found lying on a stone pavement coated in years of blood and filth. He was

very thin, scarred, and disfigured, his face a mask of pain and dirt, his eyes half-opened and staring into nothing. His hair was a snarl of muck; it was two inches long, for he was now seventeen.

The falynd who found him put his weapon away. He knelt by the ruined body, and holding a finger over the thin mouth, felt a warm, shallow breath. He sighed. He bent closer and whispered in the youth's ear, "Hear me, little one. I have come to save you."

There was no answer. No twitching of a finger, no fluttering of an eyelid. No sound came from the dry, broken lips.

"Leave him, Tawori," said a husky voice. "The youth is spent. He will not survive the night."

Tawori's gaze snapped to the newcomer, a bulky figure in the torchlight, bent to fit through the narrow doorway, his mane of alabaster dreadlocks filling the opening.

"Since when have you no mercy, Beriun?" Tawori said coldly.

"It would be a mercy to end his suffering here and quickly."

"Why, if he can live?" Tawori began to, very carefully, lift the young Alassian from the dirty floor. "Help me with him. Help me save a life, Beriun. We have ended many today, but this one will live. Help me with him."

"You alone have ended more lives, today, than all of us together," said the other, but he came to help the falynd place the dying youth onto his back. "What has gotten into you, my friend?"

"It is the smell of this place," Tawori said, "the stench of darkness. Do you not feel it?"

“Aye, that I do,” said Beriun. “I do feel it.”

From the belly of Mount Valdu the Alassian Tawori of the Alliance emerged covered in the blood of many enemies and with a waning life on his back. The youth was taken to a house of healing in human lands across the sea, at the place of the Alliance. For many days and nights the young Alassian lay on a hospital bed, his head resting on a soft pillow, his face cleaned, his short hair pristine white. Little by little his features eased. His injuries healed, and his thin lips came to rest together in a soft line. But beneath his low brows, white as snow, his misty eyes remained half open and fixed somewhere in the distance, unseeing, and oblivious of the world.

Doctor Alfrith Bash, a man with olive skin and a square, hard jaw, had said that the youth was in a state of unawareness, and though he slept and woke, he was never conscious. Nothing more could be done for him, but wait for the brain to heal itself if it could.

Yet Alassians know more about the workings of the mind than humans do. So at last, it was the selyn Aruhin who brought the youth back from oblivion, sitting for long on the blue sheets of the hospital bed, her hands gently holding the youth’s face, her fingers in his hair, her eyes closed in concentration. The young Alassian stirred, his lips twitched, he moaned, and then his eyes closed. Then he lay still, breathing softly as one dreaming peaceful dreams.

Aruhin drew a heavy breath and wiped the sweat from her face. She tucked a stray lock of long ivory hair behind her ear and stood up. «He rests,» she said smiling. She spoke the human tongue, for there were humans in the room. «I believe when he next wakes he will be with us.»

«He's been with us for over a month,» Doctor Bash observed, shaking his head. He began to check his patient's pulse and breathing.

«Of course. You are right, doctor. My apologies.» Aruhin lifted her brows at the falyin beside her. He was taller than she and wore his ash-white hair in two long braids that from his scalp hung thick and heavy past his waist. «I did as you suggested, Theidrin,» she told him. «I hushed the nightmares, and his mind quieted.»

«Will he wake then?» Theidrin asked.

«I think he will, yes. Though there is something . . . I may have found memories within his nightmares. It is hard to tell the difference. His mind is terribly twisted. If I may, Captain?» She looked at the man with ginger hair, a friendly wide face, and bright blue eyes, who at once smiled at her. «He should be watched when he wakes. He will be confused, and he could be dangerous.»

«I have that covered,» the man assured her. He tilted his head toward the entrance where, seated comfortably on a soft green chair and with his face widened in a gaping yawn, was the one who'd brought the youth back into daylight.

«I wondered why you were here,» Theidrin said sourly. «You were asleep when we walked in, so I couldn't ask.»

«Was I, really?» Tawori replied, clearly fighting the urge to yawn again. «I would never. As he said, I'm on guard duty.»

«There is nothing to guard here,» Doctor Bash complained. «When, and *if*, he regains consciousness, he'll be lucky if he can lift his head from the pillows. I told him days ago to make himself useful somewhere else.»

«Thank you, doctor,» intervened the captain. «Really, no. But thank you.» He smiled. «If there's one thing this war has taught me, it's to never, ever, underestimate the strength of an Alassian, no matter how helpless he or she looks. And I mean no offense to the lot of you.» He beamed at the Alassians. «So, Alfrit, let *me* worry about my men's usefulness.»

The doctor snorted.

«Tawori is here on my orders, and he will remain here until I say otherwise. Especially when I'm told that we can expect this one to be dangerous.»

«A trapped animal is dangerous,» said the selyn Aruhin, «and even more so when afraid. There is much fear in this young one. It was terror that held him suspended between sleep and wakefulness, nightmares of the worst kind, those born from memories. I glimpsed some, though I couldn't tell truth from nightmare. It all seemed nightmare. Doctor, why do you try to wake him?»

Doctor Bash had pinched the sleeping Alassian, and with a groan, the youth had moved his hand an inch. The doctor pinched him again, and again the youth shrunk from the touch.

«I'm not waking him. I am checking if he's responsive.»

«We've all seen that he is,» said the selyn. «Or have you missed it? Please, do not pinch him again.»

«Enough, enough,» said the captain. «I'm sure the doctor knows his medicine.»

«Precisely! And if you are done with what you came here to do, you should leave. Let my patient rest.»

«Yes,» agreed Theidrin. With a hand at the small of Aruhin's back, he led her outside the room. Captain Liu

Logain went after them. Doctor Bash busied himself at the bedside for a time, then he, too, left.

Tawori remained seated in the green chair. Once alone he retrieved a thick book from beside him on the floor, and began to read. Now and then he raised his gaze from the pages to see that the youth still slept. At times he stood and paced about the room with his hands in his pockets. He went to look outside the small square window at the land: a dry desert of hard earth and distant mountains. Groups of men and women dressed in gray and brown camouflage went about on foot or in trucks. Tawori removed his military hat and looked at it pensively, stroking the short visor with his thumb. Then he sighed. Putting the hat back on, he returned to his book.



# 4

## WAKING

THE CREAM-WHITE SKY was flat and even. There was in it a round bulge that was whiter than the rest, and was glossy with reflected light. On this lustrous bulge were painted darker shapes, sharp but crammed together, difficult to distinguish. He watched them patiently, blinking slowly. On the leftmost side of the bulge was a wide rectangle brighter than the rest, with straight dark shades at its two vertical sides. Inside the rectangle were other smaller forms, some dark and some bright, all white. He guessed this rectangle was an opening in the sky to some place with light. It could be a door or a window, or perhaps it was a gate; he did not know. He studied the opening for long, thinking that in doing so he may be able to see where it led. The more he stared at the shapes inside the square on the glossy bulge which swelled out of the otherwise flat surface of the sky, the more the shapes seemed to slip off suddenly, sliding downward. Yet always they remained in place. They

stayed where they were and did not fall down.

Across from the bright rectangle, on the other half of the smooth bulge, nothing could be seen. With the passing of time, the shiny white surface became gray; it was still shiny, but turned darker; and the sky became darker.

However, it was not a sky, but a ceiling: a white, even ceiling.

From the corner of his eye he caught a movement, and with a gasp, he turned his face to look. There was a faly, there. Sitting on a chair. Gazing toward him.

He held his breath, and kept still.

The faly remained still.

So he made to get up, and his muscles tore all at once. The pain forced a groan from him and crushed him back down.

He stared at the faly in horror. His body refused to move; he could do nothing but wait. For the faly. To come to where he lay helpless and hurt, and beat him.

He waited and watched the faly; and the faly watched him.

A moment passed, and still the faly watched him: he was not coming to him; instead, he was just sitting there watching.

“You are safe now,” the faly said.

Was he talking to him? Why would he talk to him? No, he wasn’t. No one talked to him.

Again he struggled. His body felt heavy. Terribly, terribly heavy.

“You are among friends,” the faly said, looking at him—there was no doubt that he was looking at him. Though why would he look at him and speak? Speak to him? Was he speaking to him? “We have rescued you,”

he said. “Your captors are dead. You are among friends now. You are safe; you have nothing to fear. Don’t try to get up, you are still weak. Your body needs time to recover. Calm, now. You are going to be all right. There is no need to fear. I am just sitting over here, see? I will not harm you.”

He fell back aching all over, huffing and puffing. He kept his eyes on the falyn, who had yet to move from the chair, a strange chair with thin silvery legs and fat green pillows. His clothes, too, were odd, colored in gray and brown shapes and blotches: a squarish top with short sleeves, long trousers, an outlandish hat, and clumpy, brown boots. He was warrior-built with strong shoulders, a lean body, and tone veiny forearms. His pure white hair was tied at the back and the thin tail rested over his left shoulder, dropping down into his lap. His face was sharp, his expression calm. The tiny pupils of his ivory eyes were intense and watchful.

If he looked into those eyes, they looked right into his.

The falyn did not speak now. He was sitting in his strange chair, displaying no intention of doing anything but simply continue to sit there.

Propped against the chair were two beautifully crafted swords sheathed in black wood, slender and gently curved, one a little shorter than the other. Their guards were thick bronze disks with polished small figures carved in relief. The hilts were of the same polished metal, with sharply raised lines that spiraled and crossed. The guard’s carvings depicted small trees with miniature figures underneath, difficult to discern. He stared at them until he saw, beneath the bronze trees, forest cats with bronze furs, sit and lie and stand and run, slim and wild-

looking with a familiar grace. Had he seen them before? The same wild cats, beneath the same small trees?

He squinted at the faly. Why was he sitting there? Who was he? What was this place?

He looked around in alarm. He was in a small room with bare walls, a closed door, and opposite it, a window with open brown curtains filled with empty, gray sky. He was lying in a bed covered with white sheets and a blue blanket. Nearby were strange objects, white and metallic, with bumps and cords. The cords went from the strange objects to the bed and under the covers.

He pulled back the sheets and from the back of his hand wrenched a long needle—a drop of blood rushed from his skin.

“Don’t do that!”

From his chest he plucked four threads with sticky round heads. Then in horror he clasped the thing that was digging a hole in his belly. He was about to pull it out when the faly took his hands and wrestled him down on the mattress.

He fought to get free, but the faly’s grip was steely. “You’ll hurt yourself if you do that. Stop struggling! Look at me—hey! Look at me!”

He looked. Then a second voice spoke, hard and crisp. What it said was a jabber of inarticulate noises. Behind the faly appeared an . . . not Alassian . . . human. A man-human with black hair and full eyes. The faly snapped his head toward him and barked something in the same incomprehensible jabber, his eyes narrowed to slits. The man backed away. “I will let go if you stop struggling,” the faly said looking down again. “But you will not touch that, or you will hurt yourself. Look at me.

Yes? Show me that you understand. Nod, if you understand. You will not pull that out, because that would hurt you. Do you understand? Good.”

Then he was let go. He tried to lie very still and be quiet, but he was out of breath and could not stop panting.

“I know it looks frightening,” the falyn said, “but it is nothing to worry about. That is how we gave you food because you would not eat and needed help, you see? It will be gone when you are able to eat again. Soon. You will be all right. Do not worry about that now.”

The human said something; and the falyn turned to speak with him.

He watched them talk, and in time got his breathing under control.

The man left, and the falyn said, “Are you thirsty? There is water.” He lifted a blue pitcher from a small table half-hidden by the strange objects, and poured water into a brown cup. “I have to raise the head of the bed so you can drink. This is a human device; they have many strange things. Yes, it moves, but it is harmless. Here, drink. I’ll hold it for you,” said the falyn, lowering the cup to his lips.

With a jolt he pulled back, turned his head away, shut his eyes, and waited for the beating.

It did not come.

His heart felt suddenly swollen. It made his breathing quiver.

After a moment he heard water pouring, and dared to take a look. The falyn was emptying some of the water into the pitcher. Then again he held out the cup, though not as close.

“Take it,” he said, “take the cup.”

He remained still.

“Are you not thirsty? Take the cup.”

He was thirsty.

Was the falynd really handing him a cup with water? And was he being asked to take it? Was he really supposed to take it?

He lifted a hand—it was very thin, and trembling—and reached for it. The falynd let him have it. It felt heavy. He looked inside and saw a little water. The inside of the cup was white—was it made of paper? He looked at his hand, and then raised his other hand. They were scarred, and jagged purple rings were carved in both his wrists; but the ropes weren’t there. There was a cup, there, in his hands. Inside it was water, and he could drink it.

He took a sip, then another; then the cup was empty.

“Do you want more?”

The falynd poured more water into the cup.

He drank it.

“Are you hungry? I will ask for some food.”

The falynd walked to the door and there spoke to someone in a language that was not Talassian. When he came back, he said, “My name is Tawori. If you have questions, I can answer them. That is, if you feel like talking, of course. I will be here until you are well . . . or I can leave if you’ll want me to. Just, for now I’m here, I mean. H’m.” His face hardened. He walked away and went to sit in the green chair, put his elbows on his knees, held one hand in the other, and looked down. He was blurry, as was everything else in the room.

His sobs forced him to breathe in gasps. The tears dripped down his cheeks and onto the sheets like rain-

drops. Was he really out of the darkness? Was he truly somewhere else? How did he get here? Where was he? Was he going to stay here, or was he going back into the darkness? Could he stay here? Could he? He didn't want to go back. He didn't want to go back into the darkness. He didn't want to be cold and to be hungry and to be thirsty and to be beaten; he didn't want his wrists tied and his ankles tied—he couldn't breathe . . . he hurt. He was afraid, drowning. Darkness pressed around him. It was heavy, and he was sinking . . . He wasn't alone. Someone was with him. He could hear a heart weeping . . .

He opened his eyes and glanced at the chair. The falyn was crying, his eyes red and filled with tears, his mouth wearing a scowl as if he were angry.

For a moment they looked at each other, the falyn weeping silently, and he shaking with hysterical sobs. Then the falyn bent his head, hiding his face.

His sobs began to abate, and he dried his cheeks.

He felt cold. His hands went to the blanket with a familiarity that was notable, and pulled it over his chest and shoulders. A blanket. A bed. Warmth and comfort. And somehow, these weren't unfamiliar things.

He turned to look at the light that came through the window, and listened. He could hear the falyn, his heart quieter now; and he could hear a human at the door, bored, perhaps, or sleepy. His senses stretched no farther. He felt nothing else. What he did feel was comforting—not the human, for he was alien, but the falyn, the one called Tawori: his heart was warm. He closed his eyes and listened to it, turning a deaf ear to anything else.

. . .

A mouthwatering scent reached his nostrils, he opened his eyes. He was in the white room of the human place. He had forgotten that he was there. The faly, Tawori, stood by the bed, offering a cup half filled with a creamy orange soup that smelled of carrots and poultry.

“Drink this.”

He took the cup and slowly sipped the hot food, sniffing the vapor anxiously. The warmth, the smell, the taste, they made the tears come again. He didn't know why he cried, gasping silent sobs between sips. He felt better after he'd emptied the cup, though he wished there had been more. Perhaps the faly heard his wish, for he produced more of the orange soup out of a gray, metallic bottle, and gave it to him. He had two half cups and then a full one. Then he put the cup on the small table, which had been moved nearer the bedside. He lay back against the pillows and watched the faly open a book on his lap and begin to read, glancing up at him every now and then.

He woke up. It took him some time to understand where he was. Before he did, he sat on the edge of the bed with one foot on the floor. It was a cold floor.

“It's all right,” said Tawori; the faly stood in front of him with a hand raised toward him. “You are safe, remember?”

He remembered.

He sat still. The day had darkened, and a soft light encased in white glass shone from the ceiling. There was a human in the room, the same man from before. His skin was a bizarre olive tone that glimmered golden in the soft yellow light. His hair was black and oddly short for the



years he looked, and a thick beard, also black, covered not only his chin, but his jawline, cheeks, and upper lip. From beneath his black brows, two brown eyes stared sourly.

“Will you let the human examine you?” Tawori asked. “He is a healer, and has been tending to you in the time you have been recovering here, although you might not remember him.”

He did not like this human. He did not know if he liked *any* human. He liked the faly, because he was kind. The two spoke for a while in what was likely the human tongue. Then the man began asking questions, and the faly translated his words into Talassian.

He did not like the things being asked. They made him feel uncomfortable. What was his name? Where was he from? What was the last thing he remembered before waking up here? Did he remember anything at all? Did he know where he was? Did he feel any pain? Did he understand Tawori’s words?

He looked into the faly’s eyes, and nodded.

The faly smiled and a flicker of amusement touched his mind. He spoke to the human, then the questions stopped.

He was asked to sit back, which he did. The human shone a light in his eyes; the light blinded him, so he turned his face away and for some time avoided looking back. He was asked to move his legs and feet and other parts of his body. When the human tried to touch his face, he recoiled with a jolt and felt his eyes go wide with fear. After some time he was told to press his hands against the man’s hands. He would rather not do that. He kept his hands in his lap and looked down at them,

waiting for the request to be forgotten. When it was forgotten, Tawori asked if he would like to have the thing in his belly removed. The falyon called it a tube. He had thought it to be some kind of living parasite and was relieved to learn it wasn't so. Tawori said he would have to lie still for it to be done, and would have to let the healer touch him. He, himself, was unsure whether this was wise, but he kept feeling the thing, hard under his clothes, and was afraid of it, even if it wasn't a living parasite. He wanted it gone. So he nodded. He lay down with his eyes fixed on the human above him, waiting, and breathing through fear.

The man rubbed a wet cloth on his belly, cut with one light motion, and pushed down gently—he saw, crawling over his half-naked body, the black mass of something wide and heavy. He felt it poke at his navel, widening a hole and rummaging inside him. He heard a piercing scream and sat up gasping, looking at a square dressing on his scarred abdomen. He stared at it stupidly.

“It will heal quickly,” Tawori said. “You did well. Breathe.”

He let air escape his lungs, then sucked in a shallow breath, numb with relief.

When he could think again, he realized he was being asked to stand up. “I will catch you if you stumble,” Tawori was saying. “You won't fall.”

He was confused, but had time to think. He decided he wanted, very much, to stand up. He got his legs out from under the covers and sat on the side of the bed with his naked feet on the cold pavement, looking down at the brown tiles, looking at his feet, looking at his thin legs in the light, blue clothing covering him. He was unsure as

to whom he was watching.

The man who had healed the hole in his belly sighed.

He remembered he had agreed to stand up, so he promptly put his weight on his feet and stood tentatively, very slowly.

His legs were weak. He did not fall, but felt as if he might. He was asked to take a few steps. He slogged to the foot of the bed and back. Then he was out of breath, and sat again.

Nothing more was asked of him.

The human spoke with the falynd for a while, then left.

“I shall take you to the washroom,” Tawori said.

He froze. His gaze went from the falynd, to the door, to the falynd, to the door.

He did not know what was outside this room. If he left it, he was unsure whether he could return to it. He liked this place. He wanted to be here where he knew there were safety and comfort. He didn’t want to go anywhere.

He lay back on the bed and pulled up the sheets, keeping an eye on the falynd. Tawori watched him in silence for a long moment. Then he returned to his chair.

Sometime later he was given food, green soup and a bit of plain rice, which he ate with appetite. Afterward he rested his back against the pillows and sat drowsily.

“Should I turn off the light? It is nighttime. Are you sure? If you want it off just point at the ceiling, and I will turn it off so you can sleep.”

He never did point at the ceiling, though he did fall asleep.

He slept in the dark place with his wrists and ankles bound in thick ropes and irons that tightened if he tried

to move. He could see nothing, hear nothing. He was utterly alone.

When he awoke, he found that his body was free and painless, and that he could see the night-room around him in shades of gray, tinged with yellow and blue. The light in the ceiling had gone out, but the world wasn't as dark as he'd thought it would be without it. Maybe only the cold place deep underground was pitch black to the point of blindness. This darkness here wasn't so dense, it wasn't so frightening.

He did not wish to see the nightmares again, so he lay awake listening. The felyn slept slouched in the chair, his mind busy with dreams and his heart silent.

When dawn broke through the window, he carefully stood from the bed to find his footing safer than before. He stepped unsteadily on the cold floor until his hands clasped the windowsill. Outside, the clear sky was slowly brightening. Twenty feet below, the ground was covered in dark-gray pebbles and patches of beige sand. A short walk away was a metal fence with a brown barrier, and beyond that was desert earth freckled with clusters of grass, and barren mountains in the distance.

What a queer land. Where were the trees? Surely there should be trees, but he saw none. Where did the wildlife find shelter without them? What manner of creatures could live in such emptiness?

He watched the quiet, still world with one hand pressed against the cold window and his breath painting fog over it. When he saw the sun rise in the east, a globe of red fire piercing the crested horizon, his heart beat in elation and a thrill coursed through him. His eyes were drawn to the sun. He watched it rise in the bright blue

sky. Then the world went black. A dry pain stabbed his eye sockets, cutting deep into his skull and tearing a groan from his chest. His hands flew up to hide his face. At once he stopped the flow of energy rushing to his eyes, then concentrated on calming his breathing. The pain began to subside.

He dried his tears and looked up. Outside the window the world remained unchanged, though its beauty had diminished.

He was unsure of what he had done and why. He thought that something should have happened but didn't. The hunch tugged at him like a hefty emptiness. He stood there awhile looking outside on cold feet. He could not remember. What, he did not know. He should know something. Anything. There was an emptiness inside him. The sunlight whispered to him of things he should know, but he did not know them. There was something wrong with him, with his mind, with his eyes.

He stood still for a long time, unaware of himself if not for the cold beneath his feet. When a cloud moved in front of the sun, dimming the morning light, he turned away and walked to the bed. He crawled under the sheets, curled into a ball, and slept. He never noticed the faly watching him.

When he next awoke, Tawori asked that he follow him outside.

He stood at once from the bed, but at the door he hesitated. He had the vague notion of some worry which had troubled him not long ago, though now, he did not remember what that had been. Tawori waited unhurriedly, his white gaze watching him.

They walked through a lighted corridor lined with open doors. The falyon led the way to a bright room furnished with strange objects of polished ceramic and metal, with bottles, brushes, and towels. This was a wash-room, he guessed, but it was very strange. He could not tell what most of the things were for. The falyon showed him how to use some of the items, to produce a paste for the toothbrush from a colorful glossy tube, to squirt liquid soap from a rounded bottle, to start and stop a stream of water—"It will come out heated if you turn the knob like so," Tawori said. "I'll leave you to it. I shall be just outside. If you need help, make yourself heard."

He stood under the hot rain for a long time. It was pleasant. His fingers traced the scars on his arms, his torso, his legs. Feeling the raised damaged skin beneath his fingertips made him pant with the expectation of pain. But the scars didn't hurt, and eventually his mind caught up to the present moment. His body stopped shaking, and his breathing relaxed.

He dried himself with a blue towel, then put on the soft white-ash cotton clothes the falyon had left for him. They fit his thin body loosely and covered the length of his arms and legs, long arms and legs, he observed. He wasn't nearly as tall as Tawori, but surely, he was tall. Somehow that was strange. Yet even stranger was the face of the young falyon who looked at him from the square mirror on the wall after he had wiped off the steam. His bony cheekbones, his right brow, the bridge of his nose, and his thin lips were scarred with deep ragged lines, darker than the pale undamaged skin. His nose and mouth were small, and his eyes were sad.

He asked himself whether he felt sad. He did not think so, not right now. It was stillness he felt in his heart, and in his mind dull emptiness. There had been fear—it kept coming back, suddenly and unexpectedly—but when there was no fear, there was nothing—

The door of the bright room slid ajar and a cautious utterance came from outside. “Are you well in there?”

—or perhaps there was a relief, perhaps a longing, a yearning for something he had forgotten.

On their way back, a short walk down the lit corridor, the falyon paused twice to wait for him as he steadied himself with a hand pressed against the wall, fighting a sudden dizziness that blackened his vision. He was exhausted and out of breath by the time they returned to the room.

A plate with food had been brought in their absence: fish, potatoes, and cooked vegetables. He ate quickly, wholly immersed in the rich piney flavor. Then he lay back dozing.

Later, he stood by the window with his feet tucked in a pair of white laceless shoes. He watched the coming and going of humans outside. There were many of them, all with their hair hidden beneath small hats and wearing identical gray and brown clothing, the same as Tawori’s.

When the sun reached its highest point in the sky, the falyon told him they should take a walk in the *hospital’s* corridors—*hospital* was the name of this healing house. It was a vast building with three floors. His room, like many others, was on the middle floor. All the rooms had the same wooden doors that opened to the same white

walls, small windows, and brown polished stone floors; the same blue sheets covered the same thin mattresses in the same metal bedframes.

There were no Alassians about, only humans, men and women. Most of the men had very short hair, he noticed. If he met their gazes, the humans turned their faces away, although not their minds—those stared warily and followed his passing closely. He felt out of place, like the spiky grass that poked the dry land outside. He made sure to stay close to his guide, keeping two steps behind him at all times. The falynd stopped often to let him catch his breath, as he tired quickly. A few times they sat to rest on the small chairs that lined the hallways. To the busy corridors, he preferred the quiet calm of his room, and he was glad when they returned to it at last.

The following day in the late afternoon, a man he had not seen before came to the room. His face was pink and puffy, his hair was thick and copper red, and his eyes were like the blue sky. He wore a friendly smile, but his mind was tense and preoccupied. He spoke with Tawori in the human tongue, and the falynd grew anxious.

The man came to stand by the bed and said that his name was Liu. He spoke Talassian with a graceless, slothful accent and mispronouncing some of the words, though well enough to be understood.

“I know you don’t want to talk,” he said, “or maybe you can’t. I need you to try to communicate with us. Will you do that?” The man waited a moment, then continued. “We need to know who you are. Do you know what your captors were doing in that place? Seligor, you call it, right?” Liu glanced at Tawori, who nodded stiffly.



“Do you know why you were there? Do you know what they wanted from you?” There was a long silence. The man’s blue eyes studied him expectantly. “Can you write?”

He did not know whether he could.

The man spoke the other tongue and walked to the door. He came back to the bed holding a small book and a pen, and offered them to him.

He took the pen with his left hand and knew that was his writing hand. It was an odd pen made of a transparent hexagonal tube filled with a thin black straw and a metal tip at one end. The book found its way in his lap, open to an empty page. He held the pen suspended above it, metal tip pointing downward.

“Can you write something? Can you write ‘Hello’? Or draw, anything? Can you at least try?” Slowly, the man’s hopeful gaze turned into a frown. “We need to know if you are a target. Do you understand what I mean by that? Is there someone out there looking for you?” He said something in the human tongue, quickly, and impatiently. Tawori replied briefly. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” Liu continued. “You’re safe here. We want to protect you as best we can. That is why we need information. Do you understand? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Liu left the room unsatisfied, leaving behind the notebook and pen. Day turned slowly into evening. He was offered food, and ate it; he was led to the washroom, and went there. After the lights were put out, he sat in bed awake, book and pen still at hand.

It was the darkest hour of the night when he slipped his feet into the laceless shoes and stood up. He gazed at

Tawori, who sat awake in his chair. The falynd replied with only the utmost silence. He took that for consent and walked to the door, opened it, and stepped outside into the soft light of the corridor. A human was standing there—there had been many over time, all standing, waiting, and feeling bored. The human looked at him nervously, puzzled by his being there with an empty hand lifted in an obvious gesture of asking. The man took some time to react, but eventually lifted his own hand in the same way.

He took the man's hand in both his own, slowly, so as not to cause him alarm. Through the warm touch, he felt the human's life force flow steadily and strong, and with a swift, backing movement of both hands, he wrenched that strength from him. The man collapsed. But his body never hit the ground.

For an instant he thought Tawori had moved to attack; instead, the falynd caught the falling man and lowered him safely to the floor. He pressed two fingers on the human's neck for a troubled moment, then looked up, and said, "Are you sure that you are ready for this?"

He did not reply. He turned and headed down the corridor toward the stairs. The falynd followed him a moment later.

He had walked these corridors for two days and knew his way about. He noticed, now, that no room besides his own was guarded, and vaguely pondered that matter as he listened for the sleeping minds beyond the closed doors. Walking as quietly and as quickly as he was able, he descended the stairs to the empty corridor below, pulled open a heavy door, and took left. Then he froze.

A wakeful mind was approaching.

One of the doors on his right was ajar. Behind it, two people slept. He hurried inside and pressed his back to the wall. Tawori squeezed beside him. Soon, a woman walked past the door. He waited until she moved out of sight, then slid back into the corridor. He turned a corner into the long hallway leading to the entrance, a wide glass door with white vertical bars. Through it he could see two humans standing a couple of steps from the building with their backs partly turned to it, conversing. Black weapons hung from their shoulders and onto their chests—he had seen other humans wield the same weapons and by now knew them for what they were, though he did not know what power they held.

“They will not be fooled by childish tricks,” Tawori said quietly beside him. “We have to be swift. I will deal with the one on the right. The other will intervene and be distracted. You do with him as you did upstairs. Quickly, and nothing else. Do not harm either of them.” The falyen cast a hard glance at him.

He nodded.

They reached the door unnoticed. Tawori put both hands on the bar that would open it, then pushed, dashing forward like a jaguar. His arms came up around the right man’s neck in a chokehold. The second man reacted, but Tawori turning his victim to one side kicked him in the shins, making him stumble and drop a knee to the ground.

That was his cue. He hurried for the kneeling man, a tap on the shoulder, a tug at his life force, and unconsciousness.

In Tawori’s hold, the other human struggled a moment longer, then became still. All was silent.

Ahead of them, gray, empty ground extended for a hundred feet to a shielded fence with a closed gate. Light from the hospital reached as far as the fence; beyond that, was only the dark of night.

“This way,” said Tawori, taking a step not toward the gate but along the hospital walls.

He hesitated. He looked at the falyin and then at the gate.

“Come, Nillith. Come this way.”

He followed.

They walked around the building to a place where the fence bent into a sharp corner close to the wall. The falyin helped him climb and get over the spiked lines at the top; then he pulled himself up and down the other side with ease.

“This way. We must be quick now.”

They went sneaking, walking, then running, and walking again, trailing on slowly. Sand and long-leafed spiky bushes covered the ground as far as the eye could see. He turned once to look behind. The hospital was nowhere to be seen.

“How do you feel? Can you go on a little longer?”

He trudged ahead with growing fatigue, watching the ground pass unchanged beneath his feet. The night air chilled him.

“Walk next to me,” said Tawori; “I don’t want you falling unconscious.”

“We are going to the sea,” he continued after a while, pointing in the distance. “Look, it isn’t much farther.”

He looked and saw a flat expanse beyond the sand and dry vegetation, dark water fading into black sky.

They were going to the sea. He would walk for a while longer and he would reach the sea.

He kept on walking, eyes fixed on the water, one heavy step after another.

At last they came to a group of houses, no lights, small paths between the houses, then a tiny beach. Three small boats were lined up near the water.

“Climb inside,” said the faly. “You’ll have time to watch the sea as we go. We are . . . h’m . . . borrowing this without asking. So we want to be quick about it. Yes. Sit down there where it’s safe.”

The water sloshed against the boat’s hull as the faly worked the paddle and the coast moved away.

“You should rest. Sleep, if you can. They won’t know where we’ve gone. We are safe for now. You can trust me.”

He was nodding off with exhaustion, curled up against the hard wood of the boat. He forced his eyes to open and met the faly’s gaze.

“Sleep, Nillith.”

He slept.

Far from the coast, Tawori drew in the paddle and turned the motor on. His passenger did not stir, and his sleep, for once, appeared to be dreamless and calm, perhaps thanks to the sea’s embrace, or to the watchful stars of the night sky.

In the early hours of the morning, back on land where the Alliance base of Oxwish stands obstinate against the cold, dry desert, a nurse found a man unconscious on the floor of a small hospital room. He was alive and un-

harmed, but the patient of that room was long gone. On the bed, a notebook lay open to the first page. On it, written in black ink, were three words of the Alassian tongue:

*Nur envn ruhira.*

Thank you.

[...]

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LYNN OAKWOOD is an Italian-born speculative fiction author. Currently located in the Netherlands, Lynn spent ten years in the United Kingdom, where she worked in the video game industry. Lynn's academic background focused on sciences and Chemistry. Her literary preferences revolve around fantasy and speculative fiction, with Ursula K. Le Guin and J.R.R. Tolkien among her favorites. Her creativity is further inspired by her fondness for anime and video games.

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