

Fallen Sky:  
The Shining Blades

by  
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## Prologue:

### A Darkness from Beyond

The Zoa fell through the cold dark emptiness between worlds. It was alone and hungry, very hungry. The dim warmth of a distant star shone ahead, a beacon in the void.

A hum resonated through the Zoa's black shell. The call traveled forward in a wave of mental energy.

*Our way is prepared?*

The Zoa's agents on a tiny speck orbiting the distant star reached out with their tiny minds to answer. They confirmed that the seeds of chaos were planted and ready to grow.

The Zoa released its grip on the agents, and their buzzing little minds fell away.

The Zoa curled its twisting ropelike energy around itself, and turned its consciousness inward.

*This world will sustain us until the change.*

*It must.*

The quiet hum faded and the outside of the Zoa's shell quickly dropped in temperature. The journey would take many more years. Barely a blink away in the lifetime of the oldest beings, the world was close enough to amplify the Zoa's hunger.

The Zoa sank into a half sleep to conserve energy, and continued its plunge toward the shining star ahead.

Shouts and roars echoed through the narrow tunnel. Rayen paused to glance back then ran faster up the twisting cave passage. A long curved knife was clutched in his gloved hand.

Something hissed in the darkness ahead, and Rayen hurled his blade toward the sound. A reptilian shriek echoed down the tunnel.

Rayen silently called Windsplitter, and the knife returned to his hand before he even caught sight of the wounded Saurian. He dove over the creature, letting Windsplitter find its throat as he flew past. A roll brought him to his feet, and Rayen continued his run without slowing.

The hoarse cries of men and Saurians were getting closer, but Rayen could smell fresh air. Somewhere ahead there was an exit. Somewhere outside these accursed caves, Thornclaw waited. He ran faster.

Torchlight ahead signaled the approach of two armed men. Rayen slowed as the men ran down the passage towards him. He ducked into a crevasse and curved one arm over his face. The men ran past without giving a second glance at the new formation on the cave wall.

*You could have taken them,* a voice gnawed at the back of his mind. Rayen glanced down at his curved knife. He pushed aside the nagging bloodlust and focused on the task at hand: getting out alive.

He proceeded cautiously up the passage. With any luck, the passing guards would confuse his pursuers. But leaving a dead Saurian behind him was a sure indication of his presence in this passage. The light of an opening shone ahead.

Rayen breathed deeply and hope swelled in his chest as he emerged from the dark

cave. He blinked against the sunlight and looked around.

He stood on a narrow ledge of a jagged cliff. Talius Valley was spread in a magnificent panorama, where the Mountains of Smoke dropped away to forested hills that rolled down to a wide grassy plain. The Mirrorshine River twisted in the distance.

There was no way off the ledge, up or down. Rayen groaned as he realized this was a lookout post, not an exit. He spun as voices came from the tunnel behind him.

Nearly a dozen men emerged from the tunnel. Two Saurians loped in front of them, their forked tongues tasting the air. All were armed with swords or spears. The men and creatures shuffled together until they formed a wall blocking the passage.

Rayen reached into his hip pack, and touched the stony object inside. He had made a promise to the Queen, and by Celestia he would deliver the artifact he now carried. Rayen raised his knife and laughed.

“Who’s ready to die first?”

## PART I

### Chapter 1:

#### Market Day

“Papa calls them ‘dragon tears’,” Varna said. “Do you think they really came from a dragon?” She ran a finger over the gleaming black stones set into her long wooden bow. A quiver of gray-feathered arrows hung over her shoulder.

“Of course not. They’re volcanic glass, like the shards we find at Mount Alinor.” Tobias looked down at his sister from the family’s wagon as it bounced along the country road.

Varna was a tall girl with gangly limbs but muscled shoulders. She wore a tanned deerskin dress, much fancier than the usual hand-me-down shirts and trousers inherited from her two older brothers. Today was Market Day – a rare occasion to dress up. The beautiful Elkwood bow was a gift from their father earlier in the year for her thirteenth birthday. Varna carried it with love.

“Still, I think they’re magic.” Varna took her eyes from the stones and peered ahead at the trail. She ignored her brother’s condescending gaze as the wagon thumped beside her.

“And maybe my sword flew from the back side of a unicorn,” Tobias said with a smirk.

“You don’t have to be crude.”

Varna lengthened her stride and marched ahead of the wagon. Tobias shook his head. He always enjoyed teasing his little sister, but she seemed very sensitive today. She was probably excited by the unfamiliar journey and anticipation of Market Day.

Tobias was only two years older than Varna but felt like her guardian on this trip. Their father Lanark and older brother Branar had ridden ahead to Fardoth with samples of their grape and greenrope goods. Tobias was charged with driving their heavily loaded wagon from the farm to market while Varna kept an eye out for trouble. Although the past trips to market had been uneventful, Tobias felt the newfound responsibilities in his sore shoulders and rump.

He wiped a bead of sweat from his face while holding the reins loosely in his right hand. Tobias was already as tall as his father and older brother. He had trim muscles and dark skin from days in the fields. His black hair was tied into long braids held back by a thin leather strip. His wool trousers and vest were plain but fit him well. At his side hung a sturdy steel blade a little shorter than his arm. He had received the sword on his own thirteenth birthday and remembered how special it had seemed in the first year. Then he trained every night with his older brother until the sword felt so natural in his hand that it became part of his body. He could understand Varna’s defensive love of her bow, the gift that symbolized her ascension to womanhood.

Varna walked faster as the trail crested a hill. Fardoth came into view in the wide valley below. The small town was nestled against the winding western bank of the Mirrorshine River. White tendrils of smoke rose into the autumn sky from several

chimneys. Colorful tents and wagons were already in place at the market grounds on the southern side of the town.

Tobias smiled. His sister had come to the market twice before and this was his fourth year in Fardoth. But this year was different. This year his father had been selected to join a group of local merchants to travel south to the Celestial Palace with offerings and samples of goods produced by the lake tribes. Father had been chosen for the journey once before, but only Branar was old enough to accompany him then. Now that Tobias and Varna has passed their rites of ascension and two additional families worked on the farm, Lanark could take all three of his children to see the greatest city in Cintras, the Celestial Palace.

“Slow down, Varna. Help guide the horses.”

Varna took the harness of the lead horse. She stepped lightly down the rocky trail, guiding the horses down the easiest path. Tobias stood on the front of the wagon and let his legs absorb most of the bouncing. He held the reins tight in one hand, the other hand on his hip. His fingers touched the hilt of his sword to stop it from slapping against his leg.

The afternoon shadows were growing long by the time the wagon rolled through the gates of Fardoth market. Lanterns flickered to life in the orange twilight and the smells of a multitude of food vendors washed over Tobias and Varna. All traces of Varna’s poutiness vanished as soon as she entered the market. She gave Tobias a quick smile before returning her attention to the sights, sounds, and smells around her.

Varna put a hand on her rumbling stomach. Neither she nor Tobias had coins to buy the breads, sweet cakes, fruits, or roasted meats the vendors waved in their faces.

Moments later, their eldest brother Branar appeared at the back of the wagon and called out to them.

“Glad you could make it here before nightfall.”

“We got a late start,” Tobias replied. “Gillia wanted to put on another barrel of wine.”

Branar climbed onto the wagon and moved to the front. Tobias gratefully handed over the reins and jumped down beside the wagon. He stretched his legs and loped closer to his sister.

“Did the barrel fit?” Branar asked.

“Was like hiding an ox in a henhouse,” Tobias replied with a grin, “but we got her in.” Old Aunt Gillia was running the farm while they were away. She was insufferably bossy even when their father was around, and a dictator when he wasn’t. She had commanded them to fit another barrel on the wagon, so it was done.

Branar steered the wagon down the crowded market row until they reached an empty plot of land next to their father’s green tent. They unhitched the horses and carefully guided the wagon into place by hand. Tobias shoved triangles of wood under the wagon’s wheels. Varna led the horses to a feed pen where two horses were already grazing.

“The horses are dining well enough, but when are we to be fed, dear brother?”

Varna called over her shoulder to Branar.

Before Branar could respond, the front of the green tent opened. Lanark stepped out, a soft white globe suspended from his hand. His broad shoulders were starting to

slouch with age, but he held his gray bearded chin high. His children nodded in respect as Lanark hung the paper lantern on a hook above his tent.

“Fear not, I will never let my children starve.” Lanark winked at Varna. “We walk a long road tomorrow. Go. Eat, and enjoy this evening.”

Lanark opened a pouch at his belt and fished out a handful of coins.

“Spend wisely, as these will be your only coins for the Celestial market as well.”

Branar, Tobias and Varna lined up in their well-practiced row of eldest to youngest, hands extended toward their father at shoulder height. There were smiles on all four faces.

The three young Riverstones wandered in a loose line through the market, Branar in the lead. Varna followed close behind her adult brother as he muscled his way through throngs of people. The noise was as overwhelming as the smells that drifted through the market. Tobias tried to stay within an arm’s length to his sister. Whenever one of them wanted to stop and sample or buy a trinket or piece of food, he or she would reach out and wave to or touch the others. It was far too difficult to be heard over the din.

Branar and Varna stopped for sweet twisted bread and sticks of various meats. Tobias sampled the bread but passed over the meat for a long skewer of roasted vegetables. Their mother had never eaten meat, but of the children only Tobias followed the same diet. He was very young when he made the realization that the rabbits in his stew were the same that he had played with the day before. His mother was pleased with his decision and helped him find an alternate diet.

All three were soon sated and eager to escape the pushing crowds. They retreated

to a quiet corner of the market where rug sellers were rolling up their samples for the night. Branar nudged Tobias in the ribs with his elbow.

“I suppose you want to visit the weavers' guild,” he said with a hint of amusement.

Tobias looked to his feet and thoughtfully inspected his boot. Varna looked back and forth between her brothers.

“Weavers' guild? Why would –”

A look of realization lit Varna's face. “Jessa. Right? Am I right?”

Tobias shrugged and ignored his sister. Jessa Mordan was the daughter of a local weaver who visited the Riverstone farm twice a year for dried greenrope fibers. She was nearly the same age as Tobias, and they enjoyed spending time together when her family visited. Tobias hadn't thought of trying to find her at the market, but there was a good chance the weavers of the Mordan clan were selling their greenrope clothing and blankets somewhere nearby.

“We could say hello to the Mordans if they're still here,” Tobias tried to say nonchalantly. Varna and Branar didn't fall for it.

“Hello Jessa my dearest,” Branar cooed as he bowed to Varna. She responded with a dramatic swoon.

“Oh Tobias, you're so handsome and strong!”

Tobias snorted and turned away from his siblings' teasing. They continued anyway, kissing the air with loud smooching sounds.

Farther down the market row, several men were lifting bundles of blankets onto the back of a very gruff looking donkey.

Tobias stepped forward. The donkey looked familiar. Sure enough, a young woman soon walked out of a tent to help secure the blankets on the donkey, an ill-tempered beast named Gacho. The Mordan weaver clan had owned Gacho for ages and overlooked his habit of biting anyone who touched any part of his head, including his gigantic ears.

The young woman tied down the blankets and patted Gacho on the neck. Unlike most people of the dark-haired lake tribes, Jessa had reddish gold hair and green eyes. She was petite and fair-skinned but not unaccustomed to hard work. Small beads adorned the front of her white blouse. Her blue skirt fell below her knees, leaving a swath of exposed calf above fleece lined buckskin boots.

Tobias quickly walked towards Jessa, not caring whether or not Branar and Varna followed. Gacho glowered and exposed his teeth as Tobias approached.

“Jessa?” Tobias slowed to a leisurely stroll and brushed his braids back behind his ear.

Jessa turned and a wide smile spread across her face. “Tobias!”

Varna and Branar followed Tobias, hiding their amusement with equally broad smiles.

“It’s so good to see you!” Jessa said. “I heard your family was chosen to present tribute to the Sky Queen.”

“It’s true. We’re leaving tomorrow morning,” Tobias replied. He suddenly wished that Varna and Branar were far away. Talking to Jessa was much easier on the farm, where they could find privacy in the rolling hills or down by the shore of Lake Minas.

Gacho gave a tug on his harness, and Jessa looked back.

“I wish we could talk longer, but I must get these to the guild house before nightfall.” Jessa said. “Have you three eaten supper? My grandmother has a stew cooking.”

Tobias rubbed his belly. The bread and vegetables were filling, but like most teenage boys he was always ready for another meal.

“Sounds delicious!” Tobias said.

“But we can’t tonight,” Branar interrupted. “Early start tomorrow.”

Jessa looked disappointed, and Tobias suddenly looked unhappier than Gacho the donkey.

“Well, good evening then,” Jessa said. Branar nodded towards her, and looked around for his sister.

Varna was occupied at the nearby booth of a silk merchant, running her fingers over a magnificent silk dress dyed with swirling colors. The merchant wore a bright red turban and was extolling the virtues of his fabric in an accent Varna could barely understand. She set aside the beautiful dress as Branar swooped in.

“Be careful with your money,” Branar warned, casting a suspicious eye at the merchant. “It has to last the entire trip.”

He put a hand on Varna’s shoulder and guided her towards Tobias, who was standing close to Jessa saying quiet goodbyes.

Tobias bowed to Jessa again.

“I promise to bring you a gift. Farewell.”

“Good journey, Tobias.” Jessa replied.

Tobias joined Branar and Varna, walking quickly down the market row. He resolved not to look back, though he was aching for one more look at Jessa. Branar and Varna continued their teasing until they were distracted by a man blowing fire from his mouth.

They stood and watched the man for several minutes, and dropped a coin in the cup at his feet. He gave them a wink as he took another swig from a flask and blew a spray across his torch.

The young Riverstones guarded their remaining coins with cupped hands as they walked to their father's tent. They found him inside hunched over an inventory scroll. A small mound of chicken bones was piled in a bowl beneath his right hand.

"Back so early? You were meant to tire yourselves out." He didn't look up from the scroll.

"Your daughter has been making eyes at silk dresses." Branar reported.

"So what if I have? I didn't buy any," Varna protested.

Tobias jumped into the conversation, eager to keep the topic away from his meeting with Jessa. "She should be buying more food. With more vegetables and less baubles, she could be seven links tall!"

"But I don't want to be that tall!" Varna stamped a foot down. Their father looked up with a raised eyebrow.

"Surely there is still entertainment to be had. The jugglers. The dancers."

Tobias sat cross-legged next to Lanark.

"We know where the real excitement awaits," Tobias grinned, "At the palace."

"What has your brother been telling you? Grand tales of our last journey to the

Celestial Palace?”

“No. Truthfully, I have only told them how dull I found it,” Branar said with a shrug.

Varna crouched next to Tobias.

“We know he must be lying. Tell us about the palace and the Queen.”

Lanark sat back and ran several fingers through his thick beard.

“The Queen was away during our last visit, but the palace is as beautiful as any of the Sky Queens who have lived within.”

“If the Queen’s not there, we’ll just dump half a season’s worth of goods on an altar then wander around the palace grounds. Be prepared to spend hours with father staring at fancy buildings. It’s as exciting as watching mud dry.”

Lanark lowered a glare at his eldest son. Branar looked to his boots but did not apologize for the remark. Lanark continued.

“I too was disappointed not to receive an audience with the Sky Queen, but we received her blessing regardless. We have been prosperous in the years since and should be grateful. And there is so much more to see at the palace. Beautiful craftsmanship and artistry are everywhere. Even the market square is paved with tiles of marble and petrified wood. The Celestial Guard are dressed in the finest silks and gleaming armor. Their weapons are works of art, better than any this humble farmer has laid eyes on.”

Varna and Tobias listened with wide smiles. They had heard the story before, though it changed slightly with each telling. Branar busied himself with checking a list of wine values. He looked up from the scroll occasionally to listen to a new variation on the old tales Lanark would tell on long winter nights.

“To truly appreciate the palace, you must understand its history. For parts of it are as old as the world itself. When the world was young, it was ruled by dragons and the ancient races. The first of their kind were born from seeds dropped by the Great Tree of Life. The dragons were born before the other ancient races and roamed an empty world. Then came the Eldaryn, a fair people who protected the vast forests that surrounded the Tree. The Mountain Folk mined precious metals and gems deep within the mountains, and the Saurians served the dragons. Finally came human folk, born of the last seeds of the Tree. After many generations, a small group of men and women discovered the secrets to indefinitely postpone death and harness the magic of the elements. They became Immortals, more powerful than any of the ancient races. But their pride and belief they could do no wrong upset the balance of the world.

“A powerful storm swept across Cintras, wiping away mountains and moving oceans. The ground heaved and terrible winds scattered forests like matchsticks. The Great Tree was broken and turned to stone – the Eldaryn cities shattered to dust. The Western Ocean became a desert as its waters poured underground into the great halls of the Mountain Folk. Most of the ancient races were gone forever, drowned or dashed to pieces by the storm. Few animals survived, even fewer humans. Of the Immortals, only the sky Queen Celestia and Sarkonis, lord of death, survived. Atop the petrified remains of the Great Tree, they built the Celestial Palace. Much of the palace is carved from the tree itself.”

“Sarkonis helped Celestia?” Varna leaned forward.

Branar put aside his parchment and sat down. His father loved to tell stories about the fanciful “ancient races” but seldom talked about the dark days after the storm.

“Aye,” Lanark nodded. He paused for a drink of water then spoke a little lower. “Sarkonis was one of the oldest Immortals. Very misunderstood, I’m afraid. Many superstitious folks today have made the Lord Reaper into a monster only spoken of in whispers. But Sarkonis was an important part of the cycle of life. With his enchanted scythe, he would harvest the souls of the dead and free them to the afterlife. He performed his serious duty without complaint and was honored by those who recognized the important role he served. The Lord Reaper cleared away the old while his wife Alpheia, Queen of love and birth, renewed the world.

“As the storm swept across Cintras, Sarkonis reaped the souls of nearly all his family and friends, including his love Alpheia. Despite his personal pain, Sarkonis did his best to guide the uncountable dead to the afterlife. His spirit was nearly broken by the task. But Celestia healed Sarkonis, and he pledged to serve as her champion. Together they built much of the palace, and gave hope to the storm survivors. But Sarkonis no longer believed in the nobility of his role as Lord Reaper. Compared to the shining perfection of Celestia, he was feared and reviled by the people even as he served by her side. Filled with self-hatred, Sarkonis shattered his mighty scythe and left the Celestial Tribe for the distant Mountains of Smoke. The heirs of Celestia have ruled from the palace ever since.”

Lanark took another long drink of water. His children waited for him to continue, then began to shift and stand as it became clear he had no intention to finish the tale.

“What happened to Sarkonis? You haven’t told this story before,” Varna pleaded.

“It is a story for another night, dear girl.” Lanark picked up the bowl of chicken bones and tossed them out the front of the tent. “We have a long road ahead of us. You must sleep.”

Varna pouted but went to the back of the tent for blankets and bedrolls. She wanted to hear more stories. She also wished that they could have spent another day at the Fardoth market. There were clothes and jewelry from all the tribes of the lakes, everything hand crafted and beautiful.

But there will be more beautiful things at the Celestial market, Varna reminded herself. As she prepared for bed, Varna imagined the jewels and fabrics that would surely be on display.

Tobias spread his own blanket near his sister’s, and watched as she hummed to herself, her eyes half closed. Varna always loved the fantastic and romantic. Their father’s stories left her dreaming of distant places and times. Tobias was more practical, preferring to keep his mind on the task at hand. Around their household, there was always work to be done.

A firm hand clapped Tobias on the shoulder.

“You’ve got first watch,” Branar said.

Tobias looked up in surprise.

“I thought the market had its own guards!” He protested. The bedroll at his feet looked very inviting.

“Father doesn’t trust the market guards,” Branar replied firmly. “Neither do I. The last time they guarded the wagon, they helped themselves to several pints of wine.”

Branar shook his head and scratched his thin beard.

Tobias strapped on his sword and tossed a blanket over his shoulder. He bade his father and sister goodnight and ducked out the front of the tent. Vendors were packing their goods away for the evening, and patrons were drifting back to their homes. Several skinny dogs were growling over the scraps his father had thrown out.

The dogs scampered a short distance away and watched Tobias with casual expressions and hanging tongues. Tobias smiled as he hoisted himself into the driver's seat of the wagon.

"Don't mind me," he said quietly to the dogs, "I've already eaten."

Tobias wrapped himself in the blanket and looked up.

The night skies of the lakes country were clear and sparkling. Tobias could almost see the outline of Salira, the dark moon. It appeared in the skies every five years, slowly crossing the sky. Five years ago he saw it through an Elementalist's telescope, a favor obtained by his father. Earlier this spring he had been able to spot its location with the naked eye when it eclipsed Muron's Eye, a twinkling blue star in the east.

Tobias oriented on the Hunter's Arrow, a line of stars that pointed from North to South. Tomorrow they would ride south along the Mirrorshine River, arriving at the Celestial Palace in three or four days.

Tobias rubbed a thumb along the leather wrapped hilt of his sword. He had never traveled so far from the small farm his family called home. Something moved in his belly. Fear? Bad fruit? Excitement for the journey at hand?

"Halt, scoundrel!"

Tobias looked around as a voice echoed through the market. More voices joined in the noise.

“Stop him!”

“He’s going that way!”

An old man suddenly ran into view. His long white mustaches swooshed wildly as he skid to a stop, panting for breath. He was carrying a long wooden staff with blue and yellow feathers strapped to both ends.

Tobias watched silently from atop the wagon as the old man leaned back into a shadow between two tents. The space behind him was dark, but a stack of crates blocked any chance of escape.

“Hurry, this way!” a voice came from just around the corner.

A red-plumed market guard skidded across the cobblestones, followed closely by two more guards bearing spears. Tobias was certain they would easily spot the old man in his ill-thought hiding place. He looked back to the shadowed dead end.

The old man had vanished.

The three guards turned in circles. One of them spotted Tobias.

Without thinking, Tobias raised his arm and pointed to his left.

The three men took off at a trot without so much as a nod of thanks. Tobias frowned to himself. *Did I mislead the market guards to protect a thief? Or worse?* He glanced back to the dead end.

For a moment, it looked empty. Then what appeared to be an old canvas draped over the crates moved. The old man swept his cloak aside and strode out into the moonlight.

The old man’s gaze found Tobias. He froze, silently assessing the situation. Then he lifted his hand in a salute.

Tobias stared, his own hand frozen on the hilt of his sword.

The old man suddenly dropped his hood over his face and padded quickly out of view as silently as a cat.

Tobias forced himself to steady his breathing, uncertain of what he had just witnessed. He pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders and looked out across the now quiet market.

## CHAPTER 2:

### Trouble on the Road

The caravan set out at dawn the next morning. With few stops, they would reach the Celestial Palace on the third day of travel. Tobias swayed in the saddle of a dappled horse near the rear of the small caravan. Ten merchants and their help, mostly family, were making the journey south to pay homage to the Sky Queen. They were carrying a small fortune of goods. Sentries rode in a loose ring around the line of five wagons as it moved down Old Maverin's Road.

Tobias yawned. He had not slept much after Branar had relieved him late last night. Too many thoughts were racing through his head. What experiences would the palace hold? Did the market guards ever catch the old man?

His silent question was answered a short time later when a black mare galloped from a wooded area ahead of them, the old man bouncing on her back. Tobias put a hand to his sword. It was halfway from its sheath before a merchant near the front of the caravan waved to the old man.

“Weddington, you old dog! I thought you had missed our departure, drunk in a ditch somewhere.”

Weddington slowed his horse as he approached. “Nay, I've barely started drinkin’,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. He cast a gaze over the rest of the caravan. He made eye contact with Tobias, and his long mustaches raised with his grin.

Weddington returned his gaze to the merchant. “Ran into a spot of trouble with the market guards last night. Had to wait until you left Fardoth ‘fore I could meet up.”

Tobias rode closer, desperate to hear more. Anjelo, the swords dealer, seemed to know the mysterious old man, who apparently had no qualms about confessing his trouble with the law.

“Who did you kill this time?” Anjelo asked with a laugh that Tobias hoped meant he was joking.

“Nobody, damn it. Played a few rounds of tencards with them,” Weddington replied.

“Lost and couldn’t pay up?”

“Other way around. Ruttin’ bastards didn’t take kindly to an old coot winnin’ their week’s salaries. Refused to pay up an’ called me a damn cheat.” Weddington spat on the ground.

Tobias sat a little easier in his saddle. The man called Weddington appeared to be a troublemaker, but no criminal.

Weddington suddenly looked back to Tobias and beckoned him forward.

“You saw those bleedin’ fools last night,” he said. “Couldn’t catch a turd in a chamberpot.”

Tobias laughed, and shook his head as he rode up to Weddington’s side. “You evaded them well, sir. I must confess I have seen nothing like it.”

“Gave them a good slip, did you?” Anjelo asked Weddington.

Weddington shrugged. “Any old dog knows a few tricks.”

The men rode silently for a moment, scanning the horizon. Tobias shifted in his

saddle, uncertain if he should say something. He had many questions to ask but didn't want to be a nuisance.

Anjelo seemed to notice his discomfort.

“Master Weddington, do you know young Tobias here?”

Weddington's white mustaches wagged as he shook his head. The old man extended a rough, leathery hand to Tobias.

“Thanks for the help last night, lad.” He looked down to Tobias's sword as they grasped hands. “You know how to use that blade?”

Tobias grinned, and nodded proudly. “I train nearly every evening, sir.”

Weddington withdrew his hand and looked Tobias up and down. “Want to be a warrior, do ya?”

Tobias paused. He didn't often think of a future beyond the farm, he was too badly needed. And although he practiced often with his brother, Tobias had never hurt another person with his sword. He had only used it to kill once, to put down a coyote badly injured by a snare. The thought of spilling human blood made Tobias very uncomfortable.

“No sir. I just want to protect my family.”

Weddington considered this for a moment then nodded. “Good lad.”

Anjelo rode closer. “Your father chose a good blade for you. It's one of the finest I've ever sold. Perfect balance, and as strong as Celestial steel. Should you ever decide to master your skills, this is the man to see.”

“You're a swordsman?” Tobias asked Weddington. He looked to the old man's wooden staff.

“Sword, bow, lance, staff – this old dog has taught some of the finest warriors in Cintras,” Anjelo answered before Weddington could open his mouth. “He carries that oversized toothpick because he thinks a sword is too dangerous. Can you believe that?”

Too dangerous to others or himself, Tobias wondered silently. In the short time Weddington had ridden with them, Tobias had witnessed the old man taking several swigs from a flask. He was dubious of Anjelo’s claims, not just because of the merchant’s tendency towards exaggeration, but also because Weddington looked more like a grizzled trapper from the hills than a master swordsman. A staff was much more practical than a sword for an aging man, especially a drunk. It doubled as a walking stick and hurt less if you accidentally fell on it.

Tobias rode with Weddington and Anjelo a while longer, then excused himself and returned to his father’s wagon to trade places with Branar. His brother rode out into the plains west of the caravan to scout for any sign of danger. Varna sat perched on a barrel at the back of the wagon, bow in hand.

There had been no opportunity to tell Varna about last night’s encounter with Weddington, until now. Tobias whistled for his sister’s attention, and she turned around to listen to his tale. Tobias told her about Weddington’s escape from the guards and how he had joined the caravan this morning. Varna seemed equally intrigued and amused.

“So this Weddington is supposed to be a great warrior?” she asked.

“That’s what Anjelo claims,” Tobias replied with a shrug.

Their father and a stern looking woman from the lake tribes council rode up to the wagon, engaged in conversation.

“I don’t recall seeing his name on the roster,” the woman said. “This is highly

irregular and unacceptable.”

“I will speak with Anjelo,” Lanark replied. “Please, let me take care of it.”

The woman gave a stiff nod and rode away. Lanark rode closer to the wagon, his head slowly shaking back and forth.

“I take it the councilwoman does not care for Weddington joining our party?”

Tobias asked his father.

Lanark looked up, startled. “You know him?”

“We met this morning,” Tobias replied. “I think Angelo hired him as a guard.

Angelo says the old man is a warrior, but he seems a little odd to me.”

“He’s trouble, that’s what he is.” Lanark chewed his lip for a moment; then leveled a stare at Tobias. “I don’t want you spending time with that old fool. He’ll fill your head full of nonsense if you let him.”

“What do you mean?” Varna asked.

Lanark shook his head again and rode away, ending the conversation. Varna and Tobias looked at each other, both thinking the same thing. Their father’s warning had only increased their interest in the mysterious old man.

Tobias stood and craned his neck to see past the wagons in front of them. His father had ridden up to Anjelo and Weddington and was exchanging words with them. They were too far away to hear, but his father was pointing emphatically at Weddington. The men talked a while; then Lanark rode away. Neither Weddington nor Anjelo showed any intention of leaving the caravan.

The wagons were circled, and the merchants began setting up camp as the sun sank to the horizon. A red-robed Elementalist waved his hands over a stack of wood and whispered an ancient command. The wood instantly ignited, and a fire was soon roaring.

People began heating their evening meals.

Tobias caught sight of Weddington sitting between two wagons, nursing his flask. Eventually the old man joined the main group and sat in front of the fire. Lanark pretended to ignore Weddington while the councilwoman stared daggers.

Varna sat next to Lanark, and handed him a bowl of warmed stew and flagon of ale.

“Will you finish the story about Celestia and Sarkonis tonight? Please, Papa?”

Varna asked in her sweetest voice.

Before Lanark could reply, a low voice rumbled from behind him.

“Tellin’ the lass about the Dragonwar, are ye?”

Weddington sat down next to them and took a drink from his flask. He was holding a large rack of mutton in his other hand. Lanark’s face grew darker, and for a moment Tobias thought he was going to ask the old man to leave.

Lanark quickly composed himself. “No, I don’t think there’s time –”

“Dragon War? What’s that?” Varna directed the question to Weddington. Lanark grit his teeth and looked to the fire.

Weddington tore off a strip of meat and chewed thoughtfully. “T’was the greatest conflict this world has ever seen. Changed everything, it did. But yer father tells a better tale than I, little archer.” He reached over and prodded Lanark with the meat. “Go on,

master Riverstone. The night is still young, and these travelers yearn for a well-spun tale.”

There were murmurs of approval from around Lanark. He cast a sideways look at Weddington then wet his lips.

“As I told you last night, the Lord Reaper left Celestia shortly after they built the Celestial Palace. But that was not the last time they met.”

Varna and Tobias leaned forward eagerly.

“Sarkonis disappeared after he shattered his scythe, and went into self-imposed exile in the Mountains of Smoke. For centuries, no man or woman saw him, and many believed him to be dead. But the Lord Reaper lived, and eventually fell under the spell of Mitikari, the Queen of dragons. The dragons and humans had maintained an uneasy peace for centuries, but life after the storm was difficult. Mitikari desired the power of the Celestial Tribe's magic.

“Mitikari and Sarkonis led an invasion against the Celestial Tribe. The people of Cintras stood together against the dragons and Saurians, fighting for their very survival. The conflict that ensued became known as the Dragonwar.”

“The dragons were evil?” Varna asked, disappointment in her voice.

“Mitikari was evil to the core.” Lanark replied. “The rest of the dragons were a lot like human folk in temperament. They could be good-hearted, ambivalent, or creatures of pure evil. Every individual was different. Mitikari wove powerful magic, manipulating and controlling the minds of all who followed her. But her power was not absolute. Sarkonis eventually broke free of the dragon Queen's enchantment and sacrificed his life to save Celestia.

“Mitikari continued her offensive, and the war between dragons and humans raged on – until Celestia opened a magical portal. This gateway transported both her and the dragon Queen to another world, a ‘land beyond time’ according to the legends.”

Lanark ate a spoonful of his cooling stew then quickly concluded his story.

“The last two Immortals were gone and the people of Cintras were henceforth ruled by the descendants of Celestia’s eldest mortal daughter.”

“What about the dragons?” Varna asked. “Did any survive?”

Lanark nodded. “Yes, they did. Free of Mitikari's evil influence, the last of the great creatures went deep beneath the mountains to sleep until humanity's time has passed.”

Varna sat forward waiting for more, but Lanark turned his attention to his meal.

“You mean dragons aren’t extinct? They’re just sleeping in a cave somewhere?”

Weddington snorted. “Sleeping, my bearded bum. More likely they’re plotting our destruction. Never trust a lizard, I say.”

“You’ve never seen a dragon,” Varna stated firmly. She could put some faith in her father’s stories, but not this stranger.

“Never did, never said I did, hope I never do.” Weddington spat on the fire.

Lanark glared at Weddington over his bowl as he spooned out the last of the stew.

Everyone was quiet for a moment; only the crackling fire broke the silence.

A young guard soon joined the circle and lightened the mood with several jokes.

Everyone but the grim faced councilwoman laughed. After eating, people began drifting to their wagons or bedrolls. Tobias didn’t notice Weddington slip away from the fire. One moment he was there, the next he wasn’t.

Varna took the first watch as everyone began to settle down for the night. She bade her father and brothers goodnight then sat with her bow atop the wagon. She stared out into the night until her night vision slowly improved. The half moon crossing the sky lit the river floodplain well enough to spot anything suspicious.

Every half hour she listened for a call of “Due south clear.”

She called out “Southwest clear” a few seconds later and listened for “Due west clear” from the next sentry. The rest of the time was spent pondering her father’s stories and wondering how much power was held within the black stones on her bow.

They rose early the next morning and rode for several hours, hoping to reach Turtlebacks’ Ferry by noon. Lanark told them how Branar had been very excited to see the ferry the first time they traveled this way. He had imagined crossing the river on the backs of giant turtles and spoke of little else until they arrived. Young Branar had been very disappointed to learn that the ferry was a rickety wooden craft owned by a family named the Turtlebacks.

The caravan crested a hill and crept down towards a large farmhouse and barn that stood a short distance uphill from the ferry. Tobias noticed that there were no animals outside the barn or in the pastures. He gave the wagon reins to Varna, and jumped to the ground.

Weddington squinted around as if he too sensed that something was amiss. He slowed his black mare and took the wooden staff off his back. Tobias moved away from the road to a sandy area strewn with rocks. He breathed deeply, detecting an unusual musky scent. Tobias knelt to a small patch of sand.

A three-toed footprint nearly as long as his arm was embedded in the sand. Each toe appeared to have a long talon and rough pads. Tobias was a skilled tracker, but struggled to identify the print. He had seen similar tracks made by lizards in creek mud, but this was much, much larger.

A rider at the front of the caravan shouted in alarm, and Tobias ran forward. A sickly sweet scent drifted across his nostrils. The closer he came to the farmhouse, the stronger the smell became. Tobias ran past the lead rider and stopped suddenly. Bile rose in his throat.

Seven people were dangling over the embers of a fire, their bare skin blackened and cracked. Men, women, children and elderly – none had been spared. The Turtlebacks, Tobias guessed. The agonized expressions frozen on their faces made it clear that the family had been alive when they burned.

“No damn crows –”

Tobias turned. Weddington was pulling his mustache as he looked at the murdered Turtlebacks family. Tobias felt a flash of anger at Weddington’s apparent lack of respect. Then he realized the old man was right. This had been done recently. The fire was still smoldering, and scavengers had yet to move in.

A sudden shout took Tobias by surprise. He drew his sword as he spun to see most of the people in the caravan drawing their weapons as well.

A large group of armed men were storming out of the barn. The men wore coarse looking clothes with scraps of armor strapped tightly in place. They screamed ferociously as they tore into the confused caravan. Weddington urged his horse forward into the howling mob.

“Riders forward! Shield the wagons!” Weddington yelled over the din. A spear suddenly flew past his face. Weddington’s eyes tracked the thrower, then he growled and jammed his staff into the ground.

Weddington vaulted off his black mare and slammed into the attackers like a boulder flung from a catapult. He rolled to his feet, and his momentum propelled him through the confused men. The ends of his staff spun faster than the eye could follow, the feathers leaving only a blurry color trail in their wake. Men were jabbed and whacked aside as the old man tumbled like a drunken tornado through their midst.

Weddington’s sudden offensive left an opening in the wave of scruffy men who were still emerging from the large barn. The riders tried to drive a wedge into the opening.

Tobias ran forward and rolled beneath a wagon between him and the fight. Halfway through the roll, he saw the legs of a man in a wolf-skin poncho running past. He pulled his sword sideways as he rolled up next to the man and cut the attacker’s hamstring. The wolf-skin clad man howled in pain and tumbled to the ground. Tobias raised his sword, but stopped. He couldn’t bring it down to finish the man. He turned as another screaming ruffian ran towards him.

The man suddenly jerked sideways and fell, a gray-feathered arrow sticking from his ribs. Varna stood atop the wagon, another arrow already notched. She took aim and fired again. This arrow bounced off the rusty shield of one man but tore into another’s arm.

The wounded ruffian roared an unrepeatable curse at Varna. He flung his spear at her but it flew wide. Varna raised another arrow and put it into the man's chest. He went down with a quiet grunt.

The stern councilwoman was backed against a wagon. Her bodyguard was standing in front of her, waving his sword back and forth as three men advanced on them. Tobias rushed forward just as the men made a coordinated attack on the bodyguard.

Tobias drove his sword into one of the coarse men, but another brought down a heavy axe on the bodyguard's head. The man crumpled to the dusty road, and the councilwoman screamed. Tobias kicked aside the first attacker and swung his sword at the man with the axe. The axe wielder blocked the blow and twisted the head of his axe to trap Tobias's blade.

"Run! Go!" Tobias shouted at the councilwoman. He spun to the side as the third attacker stabbed at him with a hooked spear. The spear impaled the axe-wielder, who stared at his former comrade with hatred before keeling over.

Tobias freed his sword and slashed the third attacker, whose weapon was now stuck in the fallen axe wielder. The man yelped and clutched his bloody arm as he fled. The councilwoman took the opportunity to retreat, running off the road and down the rocky hill towards the ferry. Tobias called after her.

"Not that way! Stay close to the riders!"

The woman didn't hear him, or didn't look back if she did. She ran half stumbling towards a copse of trees near the ferry's mooring. Tobias saw a flash of movement from the trees.

A black lance flew out and pierced the councilwoman's chest. She fell forward, driving herself halfway down the iron shaft. The gasping, kicking woman was lifted from her feet as the lance wielder emerged from cover.

The creature holding the lance was as tall and powerfully built as an ice bear, but was covered in mottled brown leathery skin and rags of rough clothing. Its face was like one of the great sea crocodiles his mother had described in stories, and its eyes gleamed with intelligent cruelty. A thick powerful tail swished the air as the creature stepped forward.

The creature reached up with curved claws and ripped the councilwoman from its lance as if she were nothing more than a piece of garbage it had accidentally picked up. Two similar creatures behind the first seized the woman's body and tore into it like wild dogs.

Tobias stood frozen as the creatures loped up the hill. They clutched crude iron weapons in their hands but crouched to walk on their knuckles, quickly dragging their heavy bodies upward. Long forked tongues slid from their mouths as they got closer. Their tails swung back and forth, balancing the hissing creatures.

There were more screams and a loud crash behind Tobias. A wagon had overturned, and the battle between the caravan's defenders and the attacking humans appeared to be going in the enemy's favor. A fist-sized ball of fire flew from the red-robed Elementalist's hand. He scorched a few ruffians but fell back with a spear in his chest.

Several guards and horses lie dead, more injured. Weddington was still spinning his staff like a madman and driving back attackers, but he was surrounded and

outnumbered. Varna was standing next to Lanark beside a wagon, her last arrow notched. Branar stood nearby, sword drawn. There was a nasty cut above his eye, and blood covered half his face.

Tobias ran towards his family, taking one last look at the strange creatures coming up the hill behind him. Something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. Tobias looked up to see more creatures emerging from holes in the rocky field next to the road.

He was fast enough to knock aside the cleaver like weapon that swung down at him, but the blow knocked Tobias off balance. A heavy tail swung into him, hammering the air from his lungs. Tobias staggered backwards and brought up his sword. It deflected another blow from the huge iron cleaver.

The reptilian creature dropped its weapon and heaved itself at Tobias. His sword flew from his hand as the powerful beast smashed into him like a battering ram. Tobias was slammed to the dirt. He gasped for air under the heavy creature. Sharp talons tore through his vest, drawing blood. He groaned and wriggled to the side as the creature opened its fearsome jaws and snapped at his head.

Tobias jammed his fingers between the jagged teeth and pried the beast's jaws apart. His muscles strained. A long forked tongue caressed Tobias's face and he felt the creature's hot, blood scented breath blowing back his braids. Its massive weight pressed down on him.

A shadow suddenly fell over Tobias, and the creature jerked to the side. It squealed in pain then dropped like a sack of bricks onto Tobias.

Tobias writhed and pushed against the heavy creature. He collapsed back as something big, even bigger than the creature, leaped over them. The massive blur of

brown and gray momentarily blotted out the sun as it passed over. Tobias froze in terror as a powerful roar echoed around him.

### Chapter 3:

#### The Celestial Palace

Tobias was trapped beneath the dead reptile creature, and he knew more were surely closing in. But there was an even greater creature nearby. Tobias was afraid to open his eyes, his ears still ringing from the earthshaking roar the creature had made moments before.

There were no more screams from the caravan, only the yells and clanging of battle. Tobias opened his eyes and peeked around. He couldn't see the creature, but could hear strange growls from the direction of the fighting. He wiggled and pushed against the heavy lizard carcass until he pulled himself free.

Tobias stood up, his body aching. He looked around for his family and was relieved to find them still huddled against the wagon. All three were staring towards the fight on the road. Tobias followed their gazes, and his jaw dropped as he caught sight of the magnificent creature that had leapt over him.

It was a huge cat, larger than the heaviest draught horse. Its striped brown and gray fur was short except for tufts at the end of its ears and tail. A male rider sat in a saddle behind a thick bristle of spines that stood up around the cat's neck.

Tobias had heard stories about Proudmane cats but never dreamed he'd see one. Men and lizards were scattering before the massive cat as it bounded from target to

target. The Proudmane swiped one of the reptilian creatures with its claws and seized another in its teeth. It shook the lizard like a rag doll and tossed the limp body aside.

The man on the Proudmane's back was holding an unusual curved knife. He wore an intricate woven leather vest that exposed his thick, ropey arms. His short dark hair was silver at the temples and a jagged scar divided his lips and chin like a canyon. While his feline steed clawed the life from another lizard, the rider's steely eyes searched for a target.

The curved blade flew from his hand. It swooped in an impossible arc and drove into the chest of a large shaggy man running towards the huddled Riverstones. The rider leapt from the Proudmane and jump-kicked another ruffian while the cat chased down more prey. Within moments, the man and cat were pursuing the last fleeing reptile creature.

It scrambled over rocks down a creek bed towards the river, the Proudmane in close pursuit.

"Bring it back alive, Thornclaw!" The man yelled as the cat and reptile disappeared down the gully.

Tobias limped to his huddled family, keeping an eye on the stranger. The Proudmane rider looked around the devastated caravan, and spotted Weddington tending to a man covered in blood. He walked towards the old man and squinted.

"Weddington?"

Weddington did not look up from the injured man.

"Lord Rayen. Your arrival was well timed."

He cradled the injured man and wiped blood from his face. It was Anjelo the swords dealer. The merchant had a vicious slash across the side of his face and neck. Weddington pressed against another wound on his friend's chest, but Anjelo's breathing was ragged and shallow.

Rayen approached and looked down upon the men.

"I wish I had been here sooner. The Turtlebacks family and your party have both paid a heavy price."

"The ruttin' bastards set a good trap. Never thought I'd see men and lizards workin' together."

Rayen's voice dropped a little lower.

"I'm afraid these beasts were not waiting in ambush for you or this caravan, my friend. They were waiting for me."

Weddington finally looked up at Rayen. His thick eyebrows moved together and for a moment it looked like he was going to leap up and throttle the younger man. Then his eyes flicked to the field behind Rayen.

"You missed one."

Rayen turned. A man with long hair had bolted from the barn, and was running across the field. He was already out of range of all but the strongest archer.

Tobias watched Rayen pull his curved blade and idly throw it in the man's direction. The twirling knife started to drop towards the ground, then suddenly lifted with a life of its own and shot forward as Rayen raised a gloved hand towards it. The blade slammed into the fleeing man's back, and he tumbled head over heels into the thick grass.

Rayen drew his hand towards him, and his blade suddenly ripped free of the body. It spun through the air straight to Rayen's waiting hand. Next to Tobias, Varna gasped and gripped his arm.

Rayen wiped clean his knife, and returned it to the sheath at his hip. He went to Weddington's side.

"Thought you'd want somebody to question," the old man remarked. Rayen shrugged. "Thornclaw is fetching a fresh one."

The Proudman returned moments later, but the reptilian creature dangling from its mouth was quite dead. Rayen glared at the huge cat.

"What did I tell you? Alive means breathing – necessary for talking." Thornclaw did not appear to care. He dropped his catch and flopped to the ground. He began cleaning one of his front paws.

Rayen went to the Proudmane and unhitched the light leather saddle.

"Bah. I didn't want a stay up all night torturing a lizard anyway," he muttered as he removed the cat's saddle.

Tobias returned his attention to his family. His father was clucking over the cut on Branar's head. His sister moved to his side.

Varna clung to Tobias's arm as she stared at the carnage around her. Three wagons were overturned, two on fire. The bodies of men, women, and lizards were strewn across the road and field, their blood soaking into the dirt. Varna's gray-feathered arrows stuck out of several dead attackers.

Before today, she had only shot rabbits and grouse while hunting with Branar. She had prepared herself for the possibility she would have to help defend the caravan, but the sight of her arrows in human bodies made Varna's stomach feel strange.

Tobias pulled Varna into a hug. They held each other for a moment then threw their arms around their father and brother. The family stood together as one, a swaying huddled mass.

Branar held a cloth against the cut on his head with one hand and gingerly disengaged himself from the arms of his family.

“The man with the cat – who do you suppose he is?”

Lanark looked at Branar with an arched eyebrow. “You've heard tales of the Beastriders war – I thought you would have recognized him. Or did that blow scramble your brains a bit?”

Branar scratched the unhurt side of his head. “The old man called him – Lord Raven? Raymen?”

“That, my boy, is Lord Rayen val Tirus,” Lanark said. “Champion of the Celestial Tribe.”

The battle's survivors buried the dead and tended the wounded into the evening and through the night. The Riverstone family and Weddington were among few survivors. A goldsmith and his helper had escaped injury, hiding in their wagon during the attack. Two riders had returned with light wounds, three more men and a woman were critically injured.

Lanark let go of his distaste for Weddington, and helped the old man prepare bandages and poultice for those they thought they could save. Despite extra close attention from Weddington, Anjelo died of his wounds a few hours after nightfall.

Tobias and Varna dug by torchlight. The mass grave would have to be big enough for the seven Turtlebacks as well as twelve men and women from their own party. The dead bandits would be heaped together with the lizard creatures on a fire if time allowed. They would be left for the crows and vultures if not. The teens threw themselves onto their shovels wordlessly, trying to lose themselves in the effort.

Branar and one of the riders soon joined them, insisting their wounds were minor. They took turns with the shovels until the pit was chest deep, then solemnly piled in the bodies of their friends and neighbors. Lanark said an old tribal blessing over the bodies then stepped aside. Tobias picked up a shovel.

“We are the lucky,” Weddington said with a firm voice. All eyes turned toward him.

“We survived not because of our skills in fighting – or hiding,” he added with a look in the goldsmith’s direction. The pudgy man turned bright red and swallowed hard.

“We’re alive because fate smiled on us when by all rights we should be dead. These are dark times, when Saurians and men work in union against the Queen and her people. Any one of us could be in that hole now, so thank Celestia that today wasn’t your day. For us, the great mystery will have to wait.”

He grabbed the shovel from Tobias and pushed a mound of dirt into the grave. Lanark joined him with the other shovel despite Tobias’s efforts to help. Tobias finally moved back to stand with his sister and brother.

“Did you hear that?” Varna whispered. “He called those things Saurians. I thought they weren’t real. Not anymore.”

Tobias grimaced. “Seemed real enough to me.” He rubbed his aching side where the thing had clawed him.

He didn’t care what they were called. Today he and his family had been nearly killed by the lizard creatures and bandits. He was just happy the beasts were now dead. Tobias felt a nagging guilt at the back of his mind, but he quickly pushed it aside. He silently reassured himself that the brutes who slaughtered the Turtlebacks and so many of his tribe’s representatives deserved to die.

The remaining caravan was consolidated into two wagons before the first rays of dawn began to glow on the horizon. Many goods had to be left behind to make room for the wounded. The best goods were hidden in the Turtlebacks’ cellar in hopes they could be retrieved on the way home. The now small caravan set out as soon as there was enough light to see the road ahead.

Branar and Lanark drove the first wagon; the goldsmith and his assistant drove the second. Varna and one of the lightly injured guards sat at the back of the rear wagon, bows ready. Tobias and the other injured rider scouted any side paths on foot, while Lord Rayen rode Thornclaw ahead.

Weddington marched in front of the lead wagon, showing remarkable stamina for a man his age. They stopped shortly after the sun had reached its highest point in the sky. Both horses and humans needed rest and water. Rayen joined the travelers, but his cat continued to prowl the area for any sign of danger.

Rayen paced, chewing a piece of dried meat. Weddington sat nearby. He took a long drink, stretched his legs, and lowered his gaze at Rayen.

“Last night you said those men an' lizards were after you. What's the grudge, champion?”

Rayen muttered something under his breath and continued to pace. Weddington's eyes followed him. Rayen looked warily at Tobias and Varna, who were sitting close enough to hear every word. Finally, he spoke.

“The Queen sent me on a mission to find something. I found it, but the lizards weren't keen on me taking it.”

“And the men?” Weddington prodded.

“They were already working with the lizards when I found them – gathering in an ancient temple deep in the Mountains of Smoke. The tomb of Ralmut should have been abandoned, but they were using it as a meeting place,” Rayen said. He stopped pacing and reached into his hip pack.

He withdrew what looked to be a piece of a human thighbone, broken so that it was less than two hands long. The bone was petrified into bands of brown and tan stone.

“Ana said she only needed a piece, but my blade Windsplitter tasted a lot of blood just for this bit. Spent over a year trying to find that damn tomb. “

Ana? Tobias was confused. Then he realized that Rayen was talking about the Sky Queen. He had never heard anyone refer to Queen Anastasia dal Lenor by her informal name, and so casually.

“Figure I walked into something I wasn’t supposed to see,” Rayen continued. “Otherwise they wouldn’t be chasing me so hard – not for a chunk of old bone.” He jammed the petrified bone back into his hip pack.

“This wasn’t the same group that was following us from the mountains. Me and Thornclaw crossed the river several miles north and gave them the slip. They must have sent word to a group to the south.”

“They’re organizing,” Weddington grumbled.

“Ana already knows something is amiss,” Rayen said quietly. “I suspect it’s why she sent me on this quest. She’s planning something big.”

Tobias couldn’t hold his tongue any longer.

“No disrespect, my lord, but do you really claim to know the Sky Queen so well?” Rayen stared at him, then smiled. The scar that split his lip made the smile look more like a sneer.

“The mangy dog knows her well enough to share her bed, young Riverstone,” Weddington said with a chuckle. “He’s not only her champion, he’s her consort.”

Tobias started to stammer an apology. Then he looked away to cover his embarrassment.

Thornclaw loped into camp and rubbed his head against Rayen, nearly knocking the man over. Rayen scratched the cat’s ear then pushed him aside. Thornclaw walked a few paces and flopped to the ground. The horses eyed him nervously.

Varna’s eyes lit up as she watched the massive cat clean himself. She stood up and took a step forward, reaching for Thornclaw.

“Aren’t you a handsome kitten! Hello there –”

“I wouldn’t try to pet him, miss.” Rayen said. He nodded towards Thornclaw, who was regarding Varna with narrow eyes. “Last year he took a groomer’s arm.”

Varna quickly sat down and remained very still. Thornclaw licked his lips while staring directly at her, then yawned. He resumed licking his paw and running it over his bristly mane.

When the horses were rested, they were hitched to the wagons again. The travelers continued south, following the winding Mirrorshine. The terrain became rockier into the afternoon, and soon they were winding between reddish brown buttes and hills topped by twisting oaks and golden yellow grass.

Tobias was moved to Branar’s position steering the lead wagon, where he sat quietly staring at the road. Lanark was in the rear wagon looking over the wounded. Weddington trudged tirelessly ahead of the wagon, occasionally pushing aside stones and fallen tree branches with his staff.

Late in the afternoon they crossed paths with another small caravan going north on the road. Weddington told the merchant family and their guards about the bandits at Turtlebacks ferry. He made no mention of the Saurians. The merchants were grateful about the warning but looked surprised to see Lord Rayen. As the wagons rolled on, Varna heard snippets of whispers from the other caravan.

“ – thought he was dead. Does he know?”

“ – wouldn’t want to be there –”

“ – her baby. It’s not –”

Varna craned her neck, curious to hear more. But the wagons rolled onward, leaving clouds of pink dust in their wake. The guard beside Varna suddenly inhaled sharply despite the dust. Varna turned to see why.

Ahead of them, the Mirrorshine dipped into a wide valley where a large village clustered around the meandering river. On the other side of the valley rose a magnificent pillar of stone, straight up and higher than any tree. It appeared to be made entirely of petrified wood, polished to a gleaming finish.

Varna's eyes moved up the pillar, or butte, or whatever it was. At the top was a magnificent castle built into and around the jagged top of what Varna now realized was the remains of a gigantic petrified tree. She felt herself breath deeply and nearly choked on the dust from the road.

The Celestial Palace stood before her. The stories her father told had been evocative but had not prepared her for the real beauty of the palace. Gleaming white spires rose from the top of the stone pillar, with banners of blue, gold, and green waving in the wind. The towers glistened in the late afternoon sun.

The road split ahead, the left winding down the valley into the riverside village. The road to the right jogged back and forth up a tall hill. There were sturdy fortifications and a small but bustling market at the top of the hill. Shining polished granite towers stood flanking the front of a large bridge.

The Skyway Bridge stretched from the top of the hill to the palace, which stood on the other side of the valley. The narrow ribbon of stone was nearly a quarter mile long and seemed to defy gravity. Varna could not comprehend how the bridge did not crumble into the river valley below. It had to be magic.

Varna moved to the front of the wagon and joined Tobias. He too was staring with wide eyes. The castle and bridge passed out of view as they turned right and climbed behind the hill, so they turned their attention to the hilltop market ahead. Thornclaw bounded up the slope, ignoring the winding road for a straighter path.

Tobias could hear Lord Rayen calling for a healer as his cat ran towards the towers that guarded the bridge. Guards ran out to meet him, and moments later two women in white robes hurried down the road towards the caravan.

The healers climbed into the rear wagon and chanted over the wounded while the small caravan was quickly ushered through the market towards the Skyway Bridge. More stares and whispers were pointed in Rayen's direction. Thornclaw's ears pressed back against his head, but Rayen ignored the attention.

Gates were opened before them, and they rode onto the Skyway Bridge. Varna looked around and over the edge of the bridge as they rolled across the smooth span. She could see for miles around, and houses in the village far below looked as small as pebbles. Beside her, Tobias swallowed hard and tried to keep his eyes straight ahead.

Varna smiled as she looked up at the palace before them. The setting sun silhouetted the towers, but she could still make out their beautiful sweeping forms. Slender bridges and walls connected tall towers and majestic temples. Curious palace guards, mostly women, stared down from parapets as they moved through the gates into a wide courtyard. Most of the attention was directed at Rayen.

Tobias leaned over and whispered to his sister. "Why is everyone so excited to see the Tribal Champion? Doesn't he live here?"

“Yes,” Varna replied, “but he said he’s been away for over a year. I bet the Queen will be thrilled to see him.”

The wagons stopped at the edge of the courtyard and attendants rushed forward to take the horses’ reins. Rayen spoke to a gray robed man, who nodded and quickly rushed up the marble stairs of a great hall. A scarred attendant took Thornclaw as Rayen dismounted. Tobias noticed that the man was missing several fingers.

The caravan survivors who could still walk were beckoned up the stairs, and they followed Rayen. Weddington hung towards the back of the group, his eyes sweeping back and forth. Varna gazed up at the shining white statues that stood on either side of the staircase. The beautiful female warriors were holding lances plated in gold. Real feathers were woven into intricate headdresses.

They approached two massive doors covered in carvings that depicted the past glories of the Celestial Tribe. A smaller door to the side suddenly opened as they approached, and the gray robed man rushed out.

“My lord, the Queen requests a private audience with you as soon as possible.” He sputtered, not looking Rayen in the eyes. The man had several small bells and trinkets tied into his silver beard.

“These representatives of the lake tribes have traveled far and suffered much to pay homage to her Majesty, and to deliver important information.” Rayen stated firmly.

The gray robed man’s mouth opened and closed a few times. Varna tried not to giggle at the sight of the bells swinging in his beard.

“But – she said –”

“I know we have personal business, but this is important. Move aside, Kester.”

Rayen stepped towards the man, who quickly moved away with his head bowed. Tobias followed Rayen through the door, his family and fellow travelers at his heels. They bunched together as they entered, staring around the immense audience chamber.

Golden light filtered through stained glass windows high above. Delicate arches supported rows of balconies above the wide hall. Intricate friezes covered the columns and held tiny twinkling lights. The great hall looked like it could hold thousands of people, though they were currently its only occupants.

Tobias tore his gaze from the magnificent sight and hurried to catch up with Rayen, who was striding quickly towards the other end of the hall. Behind a wide stone altar was a throne made of Elkwood and polished stone with inlaid gold and gems. A woman sat on the throne, so still that Tobias momentarily thought she was another statue. Then she leaned forward.

The woman was stunningly beautiful. Her hair was jet black and her light brown skin was smooth enough to make her age indeterminable. She was dressed in a white dress of pure silk. Embroidered gems sparkled in the light as she shifted on the throne. The woman’s dark eyes regarded the ragged group with curiosity.

Rayen stopped short of the altar and sank to a knee. Everyone behind him quickly did the same.

“My Sky, I have succeeded in the quest to recover a bone from the Lord of War,” Rayen said, his head lowered. “And I have brought important news that involves these brave travelers.”

Varna looked up from the floor as the Queen spoke.

“You have my deepest gratitude, Lord Rayen.” The Queen said.

The Sky Queen stood and took a step down from the throne. Her silk dress fell over the curves of her feminine figure. Varna’s jaw dropped as she stared at the Queen.

Queen Anastasia stood looking down upon them with one hand upon a belly that was clearly swollen with child.