



COLD
MARCH

The path to freedom burns

DANIEL A. COHEN

Daniel A. Cohen

Coldmarch

Аннотация

BOOK TWO OF THE COLDMAKER SAGA
The Great Drought began eight hundred years ago when the sins of the Jadans angered the Crier, who ripped their Cold away. Most of the land died. The Khat became nobles. Jadans all became slaves and their warriors disappeared. Until now. Return to a world of endless heat in the sequel to COLDMAKER. Under the burning sun Micah escapes the city he has always called home. His father dead, his mentor slain, his workshop burned to the ground, all he has left are his two closest friends: fellow runaway slave, the fierce Shilah and Cam, the last good noble. They are hunted by the oppressors they dared to challenge. For though they are alone, they are not empty handed. Micah wields a machine that will alter their fiery land forever: an invention of his own making that can create Cold. In a world where rivers boil in their beds and the sky glows red, this changes everything. They must take an ancient, secret path north to the Jadan promised land – to stay ahead of their enemies and to keep their secret safe. But freedom can be costly and unpredictable: once ignited, it spreads like fire. Or Ice.

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DANIEL A. COHEN

Book Two of the Coldmaker Saga



Copyright

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Dedication

To my mother

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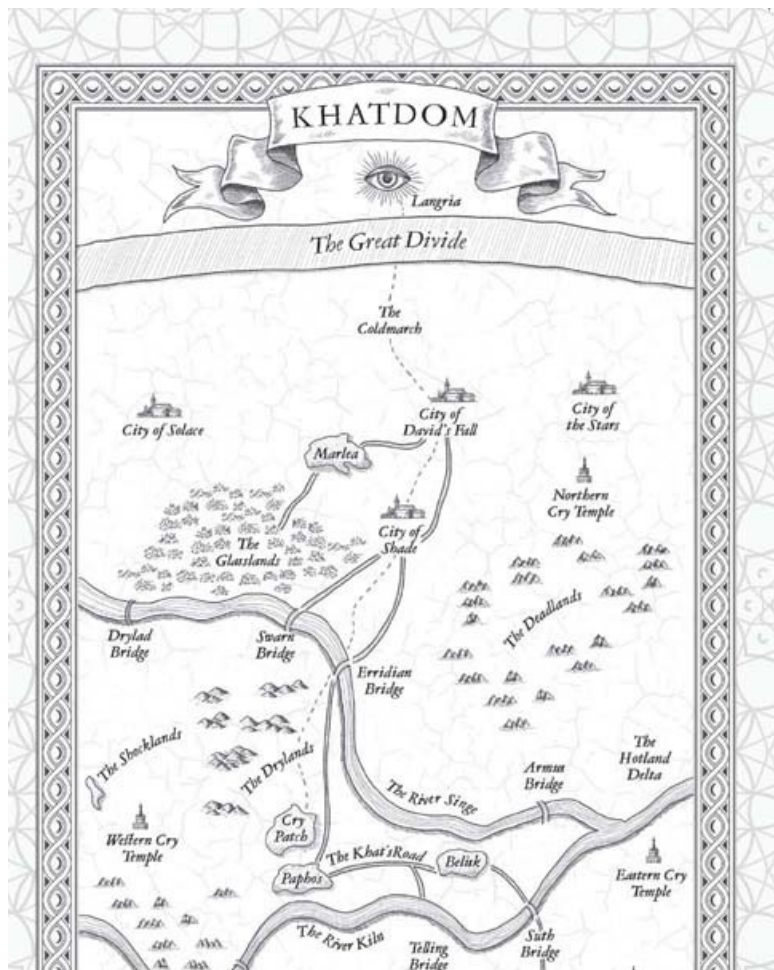
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PART ONE



Chapter One

‘Break in.’ Shilah stabbed the shop door with a sweaty finger. ‘I think after what we invented you should have no problem with a lock, Spout.’

I was still in shock and barely able to think, let alone tinker.

News of my father’s death had kicked my heart halfway through my chest. And watching Leroi being consumed by the Vicaress and her army had finished the job. I had a feeling if I turned around quickly enough I’d see a red lump gathering sand and dust on the street, thumping its final beat.

My cleverness was as slow as scorched honey. Despite staring right at one, I’d forgotten how locks even work. Shilah was breathing heavily, her braided hair pasted against her right shoulder with sweat. There used to be a blade hidden in those locks when she’d lived out in the sands, but she’d given that habit up after moving to the Tavor Manor. Something at the back of my mind whispered that a traditional blade would be too big for this job anyway, but I had no access to any other memories that might spur an alternative plan.

‘Spout,’ she said. ‘I know you can do this.’

The dark skin of her face was flushed, thick beads of sweat dripping down her neck and staining the waterskin slung over her chest. After getting used to the comfort of Leroi’s tinkershop, I think both of our bodies had forgotten how deeply the sky could

bite.

Shilah, Cam, and I had somehow avoided the Vicaress, fleeing through the empty sands and making it to the centre of Paphos without getting caught. The hour was too early for the Street Jadans to be racing towards their corners, which meant only the eyes of the sky were upon us.

The enemy wasn't far behind and was quickly gaining ground. Shouts and commands flooded the nearby streets and echoed down the alleyways.

'I don't want' – *heave* – 'to rush you, Spout.' Cam's words were mostly wheeze, pitched up and squeezed. 'But I think I hear' – *heave* – 'them coming.'

If Shilah appeared overheated, then Cam was roasted and ready to serve. Unkempt yellow hair was brightly contrasted against the red of his face, making him look as if he'd been hanging upside down all night, his blood gathered in his delicate Noble cheeks. He'd somehow managed to maintain his gold-rimmed glasses, but despite his best efforts, they kept sliding down his nose, his skin as slick as Ice.

Shouting from the pursuers became more barbed as the taskmasters closed in. The Vicaress and her forces had been at our heels since our narrow escape from the Tavor gardens, where Cam's father nearly had us cornered. If not for Leroi's heroics, I imagine we would currently be strung up from the Manor gates, awaiting judgement.

Touching a Frost is punishable by death.

We didn't just touch one.

We *stole* a Frost and used it to create an invention that could shatter the entire Khatdom. We discovered a secret that could save my people.

My mind felt gummed and cloudy, the lock impenetrable.

Our only stroke of luck so far was that my years of serving as a Street Jadan meant I still knew the best passages through the city, and I had been able to lead our group down a secret route that had been somewhat abrasive. Cam's sunshirt was ripped in a hundred different places from the constant squeezing against tight bricks, and Shilah still had clay dust in her bristly hair from the roof of the Bathing Quarters Cry Temple. We were still in one piece, but time was running thin.

I cracked my knuckles, trying to figure out a way to pick myself out of the mental rubbish. My throat was parched and burning from the long run, most of which I didn't recall. One moment I'd been watching Leroi battle the Vicarress with his explosive powders, the gardens of my new home consumed by fire, and then I was stumbling through the Paphos alleyways with the two most important people in the World Cried. It was Shilah's idea to go to Mama Jana's, as I had been in no state to form a plan. Neither had Cam. Little Langria had been burned to ash, and we couldn't go back to my old barracks, so when Shilah suggested Mama Jana's shop we didn't argue. Hiding within her unkempt piles of treasures felt like the only place in Paphos that made sense.

If we could break in.

Shilah was right; besting the lock should have been a breeze. I'd been apprenticing under a master inventor for quite some time, and this should have been as easy as breaking a Khatnut with a giant hammer. But keeping focus was impossible, as my head was ringing from explosions and visions of a stolen future.

'I don't have any tools,' I said calmly, patting my empty pockets for effect. 'I don't have anything. The supply bags. I don't know—'

'Spout, why aren't you' – *heave* – 'freaking out?' Cam asked, swallowing hard. 'I hear them on the next street over.'

I twitched my lips back and forth, barely listening to him. The lock was baiting me, the metal blinding in the heavy light of day. I used to play with them, manipulate them, learn their secrets. Broken locks were a common find in the boilweed piles of my youth. I slowly rubbed the back of my hands, trying to remember what tricks they used to hold.

Shilah grabbed the side of my face. Her palms were slick with sweat and slipped along my cheek before taking hold. 'We just made the greatest invention in the World Cried, dammit. You once talked with the Crier himself. You can break this stupid lock in your sleep, so don't go losing yourself, Micah. I'm right here.'

I blinked, everything suddenly becoming more real.

Every line in her face was defined. I could see the tightness of the muscles underneath her skin, the veins in her neck standing up and strained. I could make out each individual rivulet in her

braid. Her almond eyes were boring into me, drawing me home.

The shouting and sounds of whips against stone were getting closer, the taskmasters trying to flush us out of hiding. We needed to get inside now.

I took a deep breath and tried not to picture Leroi drowning in all that black smoke. I could still feel his sad eyes on us in the tunnel, presumably knowing the battle that awaited him on the other side of the door. I could still smell the crackling fire on my shirt.

A snap of Shilah's fingers and a quick gesture reminded me that the Coldmaker was still by my side. We still had the machine.

'This is bigger than us now,' Shilah said. 'And you're not alone. I'm right here.'

Cam cleared his throat, checking over his shoulder. 'Me too.'

I nodded. The streets themselves had once given me all the tools I needed. I used to trust that the Crier would provide.

So why did he keep taking away?

'Keep watch,' I said, gritting my teeth and balling my fists. I shifted myself into the shadows of the alleyway next to the shop, headed towards the boilweed piles. Almost immediately I spotted a trove of sunlocks, broken parasols, and a large pair of Cold Bellows that I'd once fixed for Mama Jana a while back. She didn't used to have that much rubbish lying around in her alley, but I was guessing since I'd moved to the Tavor Manor, she was no longer able to salvage her broken goods.

Junked items sat piled up and dusted with morning sand,

waiting to be plundered. Under any other circumstances I would have smiled at the notion that Mama Jana actually *needed* a Jadan like me, but right now I had no capacity for nostalgia. Emotions were only distractions. I did allow logic to surface, and almost instantly I spotted what I needed. Dropping to my knees, I snatched two skinny metal rods from a broken parasol, originally used to keep the shredded fabric splayed.

As I launched back towards the alley, something green and swirling on the wall made me stop. I couldn't quite make out the symbol, but I already knew what the design would be.

The Opened Eye had been painted in that exact same spot once before.

I stopped just long enough to draw my fingers across the pupil.

The Open Eye was the symbol for Langria, the only place in the whole World Cried where my invention would be safe, as North as North goes. It was the land where truth rained from the heavens, and the Jadan people had all the Cold they'd ever need to remain free. The gardens there were more lush than anything the Nobles could dream of, with forests of sugar cane miles wide, and enough lush fig trees to feed everyone in Paphos. There were troupes of animals that hadn't been seen since the Great Drought, and even such ancient things as birds. It was a haven for our lost culture, and songs and fruit were of equal abundance. I'd even heard the Langria river waters were cool enough to dive right into. Langria was hope itself, and seeing the symbol painted on the wall gave me enough to hold my tools high as I rounded the

front door.

‘You think those will work?’ Cam asked, his nerves apparent. Wide eyes and a haunted look made him seem as good as Jadan at this point.

‘Yes,’ I said, shimmying the two small rods inside the hole of the lock and feeling for the pins. ‘I just have to ...’

Loud orders were barked so close that I could almost smell the burning oil on the Vicaress’s blade. Either the Vicaress had a vision of our plan to go to Mama Jana’s – which seemed highly unlikely, considering she was a fraud – or she had gathered more of her army, flooding the streets.

‘Hurry,’ Cam pleaded, sucking down a swig from the waterskin slung across his chest. ‘Not that I’m rushing you.’

Shilah turned and gave him a stern look. ‘Save that water, it’s all you have.’

I closed my eyes and tried to recall how metal could serve as an extension of my fingertips. Leroi often told me a true Inventor’s reach could be measured only in imagination.

He was dead now.

My hands were shaking with fear and adrenaline. The metal rods felt like greased needles trying to stab a single grain of sand.

‘I can’t,’ I said, getting frustrated. The cloud had parted enough to let me remember that Mama Jana’s lock was a snap-pin set-up, which meant the pins needed to be lifted at once. My flailing fingers were only making things more futile. The knowledge alone of how the lock worked was not enough to steady my grip.

‘I can’t feel anything.’

Shilah reached down and placed a hand on my lower back. ‘What do you need from me?’

Cam was muttering to himself under his breath, his father’s name appearing no less than three times within the murmurs.

‘You can make it work,’ Shilah said, matching my calm. It was as if we were back on our cots, taking turns telling stories as the night waned. Back then, safe in the womb of the tinkershop, I’d never thought we’d be on the run, protecting one of the most important discoveries in the history of the Jadan people.

I tried to feel for the pins in the lock again, closing my eyes this time, but the answers wouldn’t reveal themselves. Over and over the proper technique slipped my touch, and I finally pounded my hand against the door out of frustration, a shock of pain ricocheting down my arm.

Shilah shot me a disappointed look, but the slamming noise had been drowned out by the blaring of a distinctive horn.

Three long blows.

Followed by two short.

And three more long.

I hadn’t heard that call in years, and even then it had been faint, sounded from the outskirts of the city. It was a harbinger of death. There was a reason why the noise was rare – important Jadan runaways were quite uncommon – but every once in a while a favoured Jadan Domestic would choose baking to death in the sands over what waited back at the Manor.

That's when the beasts were sent hunting.

'Shivers and Frosts!' Cam exclaimed, eyes flitting around, almost as if he could see the echoes of the horn bouncing off the walls. 'Is that what I think it is?'

Shilah's eyes darkened, her chest rising and falling quickly. I didn't blame her. Torture under the Vicaress would be bad enough, but getting stalked down and eaten alive would be another level of agony entirely.

'The Khat's hounds,' I said, my hands shaking like loose boilweed in the wind. The needles clacked uselessly in the lock.

Cam swallowed hard. 'Sun damn.'

'You know about the hounds?' Shilah asked him with a snarl. 'You've *seen* what they can do up close?'

Cam wilted, taking his glasses off and closing his eyes. 'He doesn't let ... I've only seen the ones he keeps in his chambers. But they're small and harmless and ... fuzzy. Just relics from before the Great Drought.'

'Those runts are *not* his hounds,' Shilah said, her voice breaking for what felt like the first time. She absently touched her throat, her arms flexing so fast that I wondered if she might try punching the door down. At this point that might have been more effective than my trembling hands. 'The Khat keeps his real hounds in the basement of the Pyramid,' she said between clenched teeth. 'He starves them for days on end. And when he does feed them ... guess what he uses for the meal?'

'I've heard.' Cam's face went so red he might as well have

smears Khatberries on his cheeks. ‘But you have to remember. I have nothing to do with the Khat.’

‘Other than your name and blood.’

‘I’m only heir to the *Tavors*,’ Cam said, not meeting her eyes and changing the subject fast. ‘Keep trying, Spout. Please.’

‘Why did the Crier take us this far?’ I asked. The words came out lifeless, and I wondered who this stranger was using my voice. ‘Only to let us get caught. Why would he be so cruel?’

The taskmasters’ shouts were almost on top of us.

‘Spout,’ Shilah said, guiding my chin sideways with her finger, forcing me to meet her eyes. ‘Don’t worry about the Crier. I have faith in *you*.’

I followed the sweat beading off her face, which dropped quickly and flecked the stone at my feet.

Splashing up an idea.

I set the thin metal picks on the ground.

‘What are you doing?’ Cam gasped, hands pulling at his yellow hair. ‘Maybe let’s just go find a shop that’s actually open, and hide there?’

‘No one leaves their doors unlocked,’ I said, returning to the alley, not looking at the Opened Eye as I passed. Cam softly called after me, but before he could repeat my name I’d returned with a sharp slice of glass from the pile of trash.

‘Tears above, Micah. Are you going to try to fight the hounds?’ Cam asked frantically. I’d never seen him so worked up.

Grabbing an Abb from the bag, I sliced off a tiny golden sliver,

small enough to fit under the pins in the lock. Shoving it deep into the hole with the help of a parasol needle, I gestured for Shilah to give over her waterskin. Her lips opened in the shape of a question, but after a moment her eyes lit up with recognition.

‘Do it,’ she said with a smirk.

‘Do what?’ Cam asked.

Shilah licked her cracked lips. ‘Ice. He’s going to open it with Ice.’

Cam paused, looking as though the two halves of his body were trying to flee in opposite directions. ‘How? What if the lock just breaks off? Or we get blocked out completely?’ I could feel the buzz of fear in his words. ‘This can’t be the best idea.’

A harsh voice shouted from the street next to ours. ‘Two of you go high and the rest of you lot go around! Check the rooftops and alleyway!’

Blood shot into Cam’s cheeks, the sunburn there appearing even more raw. ‘Do it.’

I nodded, holding up the waterskin to the lock and letting out a trickle of water.

Cam manoeuvred his hand to the bag on my shoulder, digging into the cloth and putting his palm directly on the bronze lid of the Coldmaker. He closed his eyes and muttered something under his breath.

The sound of Ice expanding rapidly crackled in my ears. I wanted to watch the beautiful crystals unfold, but mostly I just hoped the reaction would push all the spring-loaded pins up

enough to trigger the lock. I had no idea how much force it gave or how fast it worked. Our lives depended on something I knew almost nothing about.

If the Crier really was watching, then this was his moment to do something.

Metal clicked, and the door opened a squeeze. A small peg of Ice jutted out of the lock, but hopefully it wasn't enough to be noticed by any taskmasters.

Shilah grabbed both Cam and I by the shoulders and tossed us inside, just as the next round of horn blasts split the air.



Chapter Two

I barred the door, threw down the shades, closed the curtain of beads, and dragged the nearest cabinet in front of the entrance, sliding it flush against the door. Closed Eye necklaces jangled on the shelves, and if someone pushed their way inside, the resulting crash would at least let us know we needed to find cover.

My pulse was in a frenzy knowing the Khat's hounds were charging into the city.

The stories said that Sun blinded the hounds to teach them pain, leaving them to stalk their prey entirely by smell. And the stories said a lot more than that too. The hounds were supposed to have breath like hot fire, and fangs as long as any rattler, and could smell a specific Jadan body even lying in the dunes.

Sometimes back in my barracks, Levi would get hold of sour ale, and would tell the Jadan children about the other things that lived in the catacombs of the Khat's Pyramid. Things worse than hounds, that didn't need to smell you. They already knew you. Things that saw only through Closed Eyes, slithering in silence. Without warning. Without mercy. To drag you into the black.

I stepped away from our feeble defence of an unlocked door and single cabinet, knowing it would be all but useless against such foul beasts if they caught our scent. If only I had my old Stinger, powered by the scorpion venom I used to extract. If I'd only been able to get my hands on some of that explosive power

Leroi had used to demolish the Tavor gardens, we might have stood a chance.

I tried to force a real idea that might save us, but I came up empty. Mama Jana didn't sell weapons. Nothing that we could fight an army with. I glanced around at all the Closed Eye fashion pieces displayed on the racks: reminders that Jadans deserve to be oppressed, that the Crier himself condemned us when he took away my people's Cold. As if eight hundred years of Drought wasn't bad enough, we were supposed to cower constantly to the fact that it was our fault.

I had recently stopped believing a word of those old stories, but my father and Leroi were now both dead. In my mind there was no worse punishment than that, except maybe also losing the two friends at my side. The enemy was coming: my mind had to make that a reality.

Shilah's eyes narrowed and swept the edges of the shop.

Cam stood over a basket of figs on the glass counter. Already a handful deep, he groaned with relief, digging into the food with the kind of reckless hunger that I'd only ever seen in Jadans starving in the streets.

It was odd to think that all of us, Nobles included, were just a few meals away from such desperation.

'It's not stealing,' Cam said sheepishly, noticing that I was watching. His cheeks were puffed with fruit pulp, leaving his words hard to discern. 'It's survival. I'll pay Mama Jana back when I can. She knows I'm good for it.'

‘I don’t think *your* people are capable of seeing it that way,’ Shilah said after a pause, her eyes still scanning the floors. ‘Plenty of Jadans have been killed for taking less than figs.’

‘Stop saying *my* people,’ Cam said, a seed bursting out and sticking to his bottom lip. He gestured around him, arms waving wildly, almost knocking over a can of Closed Eye badges. ‘Am I not here with you? Did I not sacrifice everything for our cause?’

For once Shilah looked to be at a loss for words, but I could see her wheels turning even from the thick of the shadows.

I reached up and touched my forehead. There should have been sweat.

‘What exactly are you looking for?’ I asked her.

‘It’s a long shot,’ she answered, still focused.

‘We need to find a hiding place until Mama Jana gets here,’ I said. ‘The Pyramid is not that far away, and the hounds are supposed to be fast.’

‘I swear,’ Cam said, flustered. He wouldn’t look anywhere other than the figs. ‘I’ve only ever seen the little hounds. And they can fit on your lap.’

‘That reminds me,’ Shilah said, stripping down to her undergarments on the spot. She was quick and efficient in disrobing, which in no way should have been arousing, yet I could feel Cam and I both seizing up at the unexpected sight. Bare skin wasn’t taboo for Jadans – our barracks were always stifling, making clothing a burden – but Shilah’s body was toned and lean, and even her intense scarring was attractive in its own right.

She was a warrior. Straight out of the days before the Great Drought, when it was still possible to battle your oppressors. Once it was decided that the Jadans were unworthy of Cold, the warriors disappeared.

You can't fight the Crier's will.

Cam audibly gasped, averting his eyes – although he didn't stop chewing the figs. The room was shadowy enough that we were all mostly silhouettes anyway, but Shilah's figure was uncomfortably striking, more woman than girl, the curvy areas accentuated by the glistening sweat. I looked away as my lips recalled the passionate kiss Shilah and I had shared after discovering the secret of the Coldmaker. I didn't want to complicate an already dangerous situation with stirrings that only ever made young men like me lose focus.

'I thought you were this great lover of women, Camlish,' Shilah said with a snort, reaching for a yellow sundress on a rack and tossing it over herself, the bottom hem getting caught on her thick hair. 'Romancer for the ages. I wouldn't think you'd get shy around a little skin.'

'I— well you—' Cam turned away further. 'You deserve respect is all.'

Even though her skin was darkened to a fine mahogany by the Sun, the Noble dress seemed to fit Shilah in more ways than one. At first glance I wouldn't have been able to distinguish her from the kind of girl that dress was intended for. Her back was straight and sharp, regal in bearing.

‘You two do the same,’ Shilah commanded the both of us.

‘I’m already in noblewear,’ Cam said, finally turning back, threading a finger through one of the many gashes in his sunshirt, wiggling it against his stomach. ‘Ripped and nasty noblewear, I guess.’

Shilah grabbed two handsome sets of sun-robes from a display drawer, tossing one to Cam and one to me. ‘We change for the *smell*. That’s how the hounds find you.’

‘Aren’t we going to smell like us either way?’ Cam asked.

He was right. New clothes probably weren’t enough to mask us from the beasts. My stomach growled watching Cam scarf down all that food, but I was also used to hunger, and my body could wait.

Shilah began to examine the perimeter of the store, and I quickly changed into the sun-robes, the silk fabric pulling against my sticky skin. Hopping around Mama Jana’s main counter, I heard another horn call sounding outside, baiting the hounds. The noise was closer this time, but at least we were safe for the moment.

‘Not sure if this will be enough, but ...’ I let my fingers peruse the biggest drawer. At first all I found were slips of parchment stained with writing I couldn’t understand and small clay urns.

Finally, the object I was looking for rolled into my palm.

I shook the glass perfume vial and glared up at the roof.

I always associated rosemusk with Mama Jana. ‘*Fashion for the nose*,’ she always said when applying the scent from this very

bottle. She usually tipped out a dose or two whenever I was fixing things in the shop, and I knew it overpowered even the most obnoxious smells. I sometimes had to come straight to Mama Jana's after performing rather unseemly tasks for other Nobles – Street Jadans didn't get to pick the order of our errands – like cleaning up vomit from the alleys of the Imbiberies, or struggling to carry lumps of spoiled firefish out to the dunes. On times like those Mama Jana would leave the whole bottle of rosemusk out, uncorked. I think the gesture wasn't so much for her as it was for me, however, as she never wrinkled her nose at the foul odours clinging to my slave uniform, and she often left the open bottle next to whatever item I was tasked to fix.

'You think she has cool water somewhere too?' Cam asked, looking into his waterskin with complete dismay. The temperature inside the room was stifling, but I knew Mama Jana had a store of water and Wisps under her nail-colouring kit. What I didn't know was how soon the hounds might arrive to gnaw on our bones.

'We should probably do this first.' I unscrewed the rosemusk cap.

Cam nodded, tossing his ruined shirt onto the ground and snatching up the garment Shilah had passed him. It was a formal green silk robe that was far too big, the embroidered bottom billowing around his knees.

I raised an eyebrow.

'This is no time for fashion,' Shilah said. 'Pour.'

I sent a stream of perfume down the back of Cam's neck. His nose scrunched with a grimace, the scent overpowering. I dabbed my fingers on the watery puddle, and spread it down over his arms. The hairs lining his wrists were so fine they were nearly invisible, yellow and thin. As I was rubbing, I noticed how sunburned the backs of his hands had become, and I tried to remember if Mama Jana had any groan salve. His jaw went tense as I smeared around the wounds, and I could tell he was trying not to wince.

Shilah marched over and gave me a nod, Cam slipping back behind the counter. My fingers trembled as I tipped a thin stream of the rosemusk down the back of her dress, trying not to think of all that creamy brown skin. The perfume fell across her skin quickly because her back was so razor straight.

'More,' she said, her face as serious as stone. 'And rub my arms too, if you don't mind.'

I swallowed hard, seeing and feeling her flesh under my hands. As I spread the bright scent on her arms I could feel her radiating heat, and I could make out the individual clusters of freckles around her elbows. Her skin was rough with scars, sending a jolt through my heart, my movements nervous and jerky. The flaws in her skin made the liquid less easy to spread, and so I had to take my time, making sure I covered everything evenly.

'Do my back too,' she said without any hint of embarrassment, lifting her dress and revealing her muscled stomach.

Cam looked away, occupying himself by sifting through the

rest of Mama Jana's shelves, his voice more pinched than when our lives had been in danger. 'Surely there must be a few Wisps lying around.'

'We don't need Wisps,' Shilah said with a hint of a smile, looking at my hands and then at my face. 'We have Ice now.'

Cam gave a nod of consent, keeping his eyes on the inside of the drawers. 'You're right, but it probably wouldn't hurt to have some with us. So we don't raise suspicion all the time.'

His words trailed to a murmur as he pulled out a stack of books. A little blue tome in the middle caught my attention, looking about as old as the Khatdom itself. The writing on the spine was white and languid, and also somehow ... familiar? I couldn't quite make out the design in the dim light. I also quickly lost interest, as Shilah had just taken my hands and moved it to her naked lower back.

'Here,' she said. 'Where the sweat gathers.'

I reapplied the perfume and began spreading it across her skin, trying not to linger at the dimples studding her backside. I allowed my fingers to move slowly, nearly forgetting about the hungry creatures clamouring for our blood. Shilah leaned into my touch and time slowed to a crawl – which was most welcome, as every breath had the possibility of being my last.

'And my hair, too,' she said.

I dabbed the rosemusk into her locks, making sure to massage her scalp. Her head rolled along with my touch. All of a sudden her eyes flicked over, boring into mine with strong passion.

‘We can change things,’ she whispered. ‘We have to change things. Look at how far we’ve come.’

I nodded. ‘But the hounds—’

She took my hand in hers, gripping tightly. ‘Are nothing. We made the Coldmaker. We’re going to get through this together.’

I saw that my fingers had dried faster than I would have liked, and so Shilah spun me around and emptied the bottle, holding me still with one hand and spreading the perfume evenly with the other. Wherever her fingers traced I felt life blossom, and I was suddenly aware that the room had filled with the potency of a hundred gardens.

Shilah’s hand lingered on my forearm as she put the empty bottle down, her voice going back to normal volume. ‘Now let’s just hope all the perfume doesn’t attract suspicion from outside, then—’

‘Not you!’ a voice groaned from the back of the shop. ‘Curse this whole Sun-damned land, not you, Spout.’

All three of us spun around to watch the figure sweeping her way out of the dark. It couldn’t have been Mama Jana, however, as the shopkeeper I knew was always meticulously maintained, not a grey hair out of place. The approaching figure was dressed as poorly as the dead-cart Jadans, with dirt smeared all over her face and more rips in her clothes than Cam. Her hair was the same shade of grey as the real Mama Jana, but it was frayed like a broomstick. Heavy shadows tugged at her eyes. She wandered through a beam of light seeping in from the space beneath the

closed window, revealing the face of the kind Noblewoman I once knew. I couldn't fathom what sort of darkness must have devoured her and left this hag in its wake.

'Not you,' Mama Jana said again, dropping the knife in her hand. 'You were supposed to be safe.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, tucking my chin to my chest in shame.

Cam looked shocked. 'Mama Jana! Were you sleeping somewhere back there?'

Mama Jana walked right up to Cam and poked him in the chest, her fingernails broken and chipped. For the first time since I'd known her, the nails weren't painted any particular colour, which was even further cause for worry.

'You were supposed to take the boy back to the Manor, Camlish,' she snarled. 'You were going to keep him safe.'

'I did,' Cam said, backing away, keeping his eyes off the fig basket. He nearly stumbled over a wooden chest trying to find reprieve from her gaze. 'I tried. But you don't understand—'

The next horn blast from outside was muffled, but distinct.

Closer.

'What happened, Camlish?' Mama Jana asked, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. 'Why the hounds, and why are you wearing a girl's Paphesian flutter-dress?'

Cam glanced down at his shirt with a hearty frown. 'Is that what this is? They just looked like regular robes to me ...'

'We need your help,' Shilah said, stepping in between them, standing tall.

Mama Jana gave Shilah a fleeting look and then did a double-take. Her eyes widened, the streaks of dirt making her aged face look demonic. ‘Aren’t you Veronica’s daugh—’

‘We’re in danger,’ Shilah said. ‘Can you hide us? Please. I heard you used to be a *Marcheye*. That’s why I brought us here.’

I cocked my head. *A Marcheye?*

‘Your mother told you about that?’ Mama Jana asked, mouth gaping. ‘But you’re too young for the ceremonies. And besides, it was shut down ten years ago.’

Shilah stood rod straight, her eyes flitting around the room, almost as if ignoring the Noblewoman standing in front of her.

‘And you said nothing to anyone?’ Mama Jana asked, lump visibly forming in her fleshy throat. ‘You didn’t try the March, did you?’

‘Nothing,’ Shilah said, puffing further with pride. ‘No.’

‘Mama Jana,’ I said, giving the shopkeeper a respectful bow. She seemed smaller and more hunched than I remembered. ‘I’m sorry that we came here and burdened you. But we have good reason. We—’

And then a pang in my chest, seizing my words.

‘What is it, child?’ Mama Jana asked, looking me over with concern.

I shook my head, unable to speak over the rebounding emptiness.

Shilah gave me a concerned glance and then picked up where I had left off. ‘We discovered something that’s going to change

the whole World Cried.’

‘Please help us,’ Cam added, bowing, which was something the High Nobles never did for the lowborn Nobles. ‘It will pay you back for the figs a hundredfold.’

‘Oh, I don’t give a beetleskin about the figs, Camlish!’ Mama Jana was nearly snarling. ‘You were supposed to keep him safe!’

I was about to grab the Coldmaker out of my bag and show Mama Jana, but she waved me still and quiet.

‘No more talking,’ she said, navigating the dark shop as easily as a whip snapping through open air. ‘No more talking until we get down to the chamber. The hounds can hear almost as well as they can smell.’

Mama Jana’s shop only had the one level. I’d been there dozens of times and never noticed any stairs or hidden doors. There was no *chamber*.

Mama Jana grabbed one of her fancy canvas bags and began stuffing our soiled clothes away, staining the inside with our sweat and dirt and sand. ‘It was a smart idea to change clothes and scents, Spout. I’d expect nothing less from you, but it’s not enough. You need to be away from here.’

I went to open my mouth, but her glare could have cooked clay to brick.

‘No talking,’ she spat, her eyes flicking over to the drawer where I’d discovered the rosemusk and clay urns. ‘I mean it.’

She grabbed our clothes bag that must have stunk like a taskmaster’s armpit and gestured for us to follow her to the

back of the shop. Keeping the Coldmaker tight against my side, I followed through the darkness, the pungent smell of flowers clinging to us.

Mama Jana stopped at her giant Khatclock with the Closed Eye for a face. Even though the huge timekeeper was a beautiful display of craftsmanship, I'd never paid it much mind. Besides the giant timepiece being a looming symbol of Jadan inferiority, it was also broken, its two hands forever stiff. The Khatclock only ever pointed in one direction, straight up. Mama Jana had never asked me to take a look inside the machine to see if I could get the gears and cogs working, and so I'd never offered.

'Wait here,' she said, eyes already planning her route back through the dark shop. She threw the bag of soiled clothes at Cam's feet. 'And say nothing.'

I gave my friends a confused look, which was returned by a helpless shrug from Cam, and a perplexing smile from Shilah.

Mama Jana careened around the room gathering things with the swiftness of a wraith. Darkness nor clutter were able to stop her. She gathered clothes, waterskins, velvet bags of Cold, assorted vials, and a compass. Last she grabbed the half-empty basket of figs, balancing it in the palm of her hand. Another series of horn blasts sounded outside and my stomach seized up.

I ran my fingers against the smooth bronze metal of the Coldmaker, my nails scraping along the engraved Opened Eye I'd carved with a hammer and chisel. The machine was small enough to fit in my arms, but still quite heavy, as it was made mostly of

dense bronze. It also walled in a whole Frost, and was filled with salt water, two of the main components that made the invention work. Jadan tears were dropped onto the Frost inside, which caused a visceral reaction at the catch-point. I didn't know exactly why it worked that way, but the machine's presence bestowed me with strength and kept me from having a breakdown; so even if it weighed more than a whole caravan cart, I would have found a way to keep it by my side.

Mama Jana reappeared as fast as she had gone, shoving the basket of figs into Cam's hands and the bags of supplies into mine. 'Free of charge. My first flock in so long.'

'Mama Jana, what's—'

She put a hand to her lips, cutting me off and giving me a stern look. 'No. Talking.'

I nodded, hearing every rapid beat of my heart in my ears. Shilah looked far too calm considering the circumstances, as if none of this surprised her. Cam at least looked as lost as I did, as he was drenched in sweat, and squirming with a hand over his stomach as if he was about to spew.

Mama Jana pulled back the glass face of the Khatclock and took hold of the spindly hands. Before doing anything else, she gave me a look, as though she'd been waiting on this moment for some time.

'North.' Mama Jana nodded, and then spun the hands one full rotation. 'The March is always North.'

As the Khatclock's hands completed their circle, the entire

Closed Eye face opened with a faint click, revealing a startling display of strange writing beneath the mechanical lid. The whole clock swung forwards, revealing a hidden hole that was lit faintly by a distant flickering light. The dark corridor led to descending stairs not unlike the ones in Leroi's study, and brought with it a frightful sense of dread, reminding me what had happened last time we took one of these secret passageways.

Mama Jana put a hand on my back and gently nudged me along, handing me the soiled clothes to take with us. 'Go, children. I'll seal you in and hold them off as long as I can. It's airtight, so those foul beasts shouldn't be able to smell you. Remember, the March is always North. Follow the signs, and when you get to the shack, ask for Split the Pedlar. He probably won't answer to Shepherd any more. Now, hurry!'

I went to spin around, but Mama Jana's arms were stronger than I remembered. 'Wait, what March?'

'The Coldmarch,' she said, glancing over her shoulder at the front door.

Cam gasped, sucking in a breath so fast he almost choked. 'It's real?'

Mama Jana licked her cracked lips, her eyes feverish and crazed. 'It used to be real. And I guess it is again. Now take these words with you if you can. Hold on. Okay, let me remember. *Shemma hares lah ...*' She stopped, her tongue rolling on the roof of her mouth, struggling to find the next part. '*Shemma hares lahyim her*— no, that's not it.' She flexed her gnarled hands with

frustration. 'It's been a while. Let me get the Book of the March.'

I clutched the Coldmaker more tightly against my side and offered: '*Shemma hares lahyim criyah Meshua ris yim slochim.*'

From the look of shock, I thought Mama Jana was about to faint.

'My father told them to me,' I explained.

The sharp memories of Abb made me bite down on my tongue, and I might have drawn blood.

Mama Jana composed herself with a sigh, but her words moved quickly. 'Fitting for such a name. Now go. There's still a lantern burning, and candles. Take the lantern with you, you'll need it. Move with caution as there are certain dangers down there. Eat the lizards if you must. You'll find water eventually. What am I forgetting? Hmm. I was just down there ... don't stop, even if you hear my voice behind you ...' The circles under her eyes deepened. 'I've not broken yet, but the Vicaress has certain ways.'

'The Coldmarch is real,' Cam said to himself, looking quite flustered. 'I can't believe it. My father always said "If the Khat can't find it, it's not real."'

Mama Jana said nothing, just made another shooing motion, brushing us towards the dark.

I rifled through my bag until I found one of the loose Abbs, handing it over.

She took the Abb gently, holding it up against the bit of light trickling in from the passageway. 'What it is, Spout?'

‘Put a slice of it in water and tell as many people as you can,’ I said, keeping my voice hushed so she wouldn’t yell at me.

Mama Jana gave me a curious look, but the horn calls were explosive now, even through the walls of the shop. She finally brushed us through the threshold and swung the Khatclock back in place, sealing us away.



Chapter Three

Grabbing the lantern from the bottom of the stairs, I lifted it high so we might get our bearings. Glancing back at the Khatclock, I found the space now to be one solid wall, not even a single crack where a horn or a shout might pass through. I knew there had to be a way to slip back into the shop, but I found no sign of a knob or release, and from Mama Jana's tone it didn't sound like she intended for us even to try.

Spinning around, I let the light shine down the empty corridor that stretched deep into the earth. The passageway was wide enough to accommodate us if we walked in single file, the walls so smooth they almost looked wet. The air tasted strange in my mouth, and not just because of our collective rosemusk bath. I smacked my dry lips. The air was so much cooler than back up in the shop, but I saw nothing in the way of Cold Bellows. The temperature must have been natural.

The passage took a sharp turn left after about ten paces, cutting off sight to whatever lay beyond.

Cam put his forehead against the clay wall, closing his eyes and taking a moment before speaking. 'It's real. I knew it.'

'You know what this place is?' I asked, feeling rather childish as nightmare images jumped into my mind. I knew I should be thanking the Crier for the incredibly fortunate fact that Mama Jana had a passageway out of her shop, but ever since childhood

I'd been bombarded with stories of haunted holes and cracks in the land. Places where the unforgiving spirits lived, bottled up and angry.

Beneath the ground was where the foul creatures lurked, plotting how they might make it up to the surface where they could partner with Sun and do his bidding. Sobek lizards and sand-vipers would be the least of our problems down here, and a part of me wondered if it would be better to take our chances with the hounds.

Cam kept his head pressed against the wall, but looked at me with a small tear dotting the corner of his eye beneath his glasses. His face was still blood red from exhaustion, but at least he was smiling. 'I mean, I knew it was real, and you *did* invent a miracle. And my father really is a monster, but this proves everything once and for all. I would go back to the library and burn all those paintings and—'

'Cam, stop babbling and talk to me,' I said carefully.

Lifting himself away from the wall, I thought he might start dancing. He threw his arms wide. 'Spout, you're going to change Sun-damned EVERYTHING! And I get to help you!'

'Keep it down, idiot,' Shilah snapped at him, pointing to the door.

Cam gave an embarrassed nod, his chest rising and falling with incredible speed.

'I would have thought you were a true believer when you took us in, Camlish?' Shilah said with an eyebrow raised, standing in

the centre of the chamber with her arms crossed over her chest.

‘Why am I the only confused one?’ I asked. ‘What is the Coldmarch?’

‘I’m surprised you haven’t heard the stories,’ Cam said, standing straight and grabbing at the end of his Opened Eye necklace. ‘I would have thought it would have been pretty common lore in the barracks.’

I shook my head slowly.

‘The Coldmarch,’ Shilah said, stepping up to me and putting a hand on my shoulder. ‘There’s a reason I kept bugging you about leaving the Manor. There’s already a path to Langria.’ She paused, considering something. ‘Or there was.’

‘Hold on,’ I said, needing a moment. ‘Just stop. We don’t know what’s down there. Just ... hold on. This tunnel goes all the way to Langria?’

Shilah pointed back up the stairs with an impatient look. ‘Like she said, the Vicaress has her ways of getting information, and I don’t want to be near that clock if the hounds track our scent to the shop. Now come on, I’ll fill you in as we walk.’

‘You told me dozens of stories before we went to sleep on those cots.’ I suddenly felt a tad betrayed. ‘Why wouldn’t you tell me about an *existing* path to Langria?’

‘Like I told Mama Jana, I’m a girl of my word.’ Shilah kissed her finger and waved it at the sealed entrance in some foreign gesture of gratitude.

Did I really know anything about this girl?

She grabbed the lantern, holding it at arm's length as she traipsed down the passageway, forcing back shadows.

Cam wiped his single tear from his cheek and held it out towards the Coldmaker, his excitement dipping. 'I wish you could use it to make Ice. One day the Crier will forgive me.'

I had no idea what to say to such a thing.

'Maybe one day,' Cam said again with a hopeful shrug. 'Maybe I can be chosen, too. A Jadan, like you both.'

Even the finest Inventor in the World Cried couldn't tinker with someone's blood, but still I said: 'I'm sure.'

Shilah kept quiet, but I could see what she burned to say.

'Come on,' I said. 'We have to hurry.'

Cam took both the supply bags, the dirty clothes and the basket of figs, not seeming to mind the burden, leaving me to carry only the Coldmaker, which I clutched dearly against my hip.

Shilah led us through the tunnel and I followed last in line, my head swarming with visions and possibilities.

'The Coldmarch,' Shilah said, only loud enough for me to get a trace of her words, 'is a web of stops, stretches, and people along the path North. It's a journey, not necessarily a place. There were hidden chambers like these run by Jadan and Noble sympathizers all across the Khatdom, set up so they could usher people in secret. Obviously no one could dig out a tunnel all the way from Paphos to Langria, as that would take all the Builders in the world thousands of lifetimes.' She looked back with a wink.

‘I thought you were smarter than that, Spout.’

The way she said it, playful and wry, didn’t seem to connect, and I had no joke in response. I wasn’t in the mood to joke anyway.

‘Some brilliant Inventor could have come up with a digging machine to do all that work,’ Cam said. ‘I’ve seen some pretty impressive things in the tinkershop.’ He looked back over his shoulder, beaming. ‘That your next invention idea, Spout? I have to say, you’ll need something rather big to follow up’ – he gestured with his elbow to my bag – ‘a miracle.’

‘Flight,’ I said without pause. I expected a pang to strike my heart like a battering ram, but nothing shook. I thought back to my time under Thoth’s wool hat. I wondered what Matty might say if he could see me now, protecting something that could change the world, walking through the dark veins of myth. ‘Flight is next.’

Cam smirked. ‘If anyone can do it, I’d bet my Cold on you.’

‘What Cold?’ Shilah whispered with a scoff. ‘You don’t have any claim to the Abbs.’

‘I brought you the Frost!’ he said.

‘You mean the one that your father stole from the hardworking Patch Jadans?’

‘Wait.’ Cam suddenly stopped short, and I nearly crashed into his back. ‘This is wrong.’

I looked from side to side for talons or teeth. A drunken Levi had once assured our barracks that hounds’ eyes glowed red

before the beasts pounced.

Cam shook his head, pressing himself flat against the side of the cave wall. 'You go in the middle of us, Spout.'

'Why?'

'Just do it. You deserve to be in front of me.'

'No, it's okay, I can—'

'Just. Please,' Cam insisted, pressing himself harder, his face squished against the cool rock.

'Why?' I asked.

Shilah sighed from up front. 'Boys. *Hounds*.'

'And maybe worse,' I said under my breath.

Cam tried to angle his way behind me, sliding along the smooth walls, his loose shirt and bags dragging. I tried to stop him and we did an awkward dance, both of us shimmying backwards.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'You're the most valuable of us,' Cam said, not meeting my eyes. 'You stay in the middle. Just in case.'

All of a sudden the Coldmaker felt very heavy.

I didn't say anything, letting Cam filter around in front of me. He was still balancing the basket of figs in one hand, and I snatched one, shoving it in my mouth and biting down hard, hoping some food might help me feel more normal.

'Let me at least take the bag of dirty clothes,' I said between bites.

'I need to carry them.' Cam craned his neck so he could see

Shilah. ‘This is also for you, you know.’

Shilah kept walking, her back straight as the edge of a knife. ‘Drop the dirty clothes, Camlish. Mama Jana just needed them out of the shop.’

I was surprised how authoritative Shilah could sound. Cam gave a conceding shrug and did as commanded, tossing the bag aside and giving it a frustrated kick as he passed it.

We followed the corridor around a bend and found that the ceiling sloped lower and the walls pinched closer. I’d never had a problem with tight spaces before, but something about being underground made the musty air – cool as it may have been – feel as if it was going to suffocate us. My chest felt tight, and I dug my thumbs into my ribs, trying to loosen the knot.

Shilah didn’t seem to mind, and she picked up the pace, guiding us deeper into the dark.

‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘the Coldmarch has been kept extremely secret for obvious reasons. No mention of it in writing, and everyone involved kept about as tight-lipped as they could. The March supposedly only let a handful of Jadans North every year, most always young girls. It was shut down a while back, apparently ten years, but I don’t know why.’

‘But why would they shut down something like this?’ I asked. ‘Every Jadan should have known. No. Every Jadan should have *gone*.’

I drew my fingers along the wall. Feeling the stone, the damp texture and tiny imperfections, I understood the importance of

such a place as this. That didn't mean I wasn't detached. I was walking through a secret that could have started a revolution, a place that proved us chosen, or at the very least worthy, and I should have been struck with something powerful. Awe perhaps. Disbelief maybe. Flames of righteous indignation. Something that infused life back into my soul.

But all I could feel was the stone.

My father was gone.

Shilah shrugged, urging us onwards. 'Maybe the Khat found out. Maybe something changed. I imagine the whole situation was delicate to begin with.'

'If the Khat found out about it,' Cam said, all of a sudden looking very pale. 'That means we might be walking right into their hands.'

Shilah picked up the pace. 'Yes. It's possible.'

Cam stopped. 'So ...'

'So we have no choice, *Camlish*,' Shilah said, holding the lamp higher, her feet slightly splayed.

'Why do you keep saying my name like that?' Cam asked gently.

'Because it's not a Jadan name,' Shilah said with a huff.

'I didn't choose to be born Noble,' Cam said, his face strained. 'But I'm damn sure doing everything I can to make up for it.'

'I know,' Shilah said softly. 'But you still don't know what it's like to be Jadan. You never will.'

'I'm going to prove it to you,' Cam said over my shoulder. 'I'm

going to show you that—’

All of a sudden the corridor ended in a wall with a large smear of dark red cascading from edge to edge. I didn’t need to examine the colour to know that it was blood, and my stomach tightened.

The Coldmarch was over as soon as it had started.

My machine was heavy; my foolishness weighed more.

‘Mama Jana sent us into a trap,’ I said, still oddly removed from the situation at hand. I stopped short, wondering how long it would be until we were cornered by beasts. I didn’t blame Mama Jana. Life was hard enough in Paphos, even for the lowborn Nobles, and everyone had to do what was necessary to survive. I didn’t blame her. I ached. Even with all the whips and stabbings I’d suffered as a Street Jadan, I had come to find out the worst sting came from betrayal.

Cam came up next to me, his throat visibly stiffening. ‘Is that blood on the wall?’

Shilah kept pushing forwards, swinging the lantern.

‘She’s probably keeping us down here until they arrive,’ I said matter-of-factly. ‘Then the hounds can rip our throats out without any fuss. I bet we’re worth half the Khat’s fortune, and Mama Jana will be set up for life. It’s smart, really.’

I held the Coldmaker closer to my chest, wondering how I could at least save the machine. Even if I was disposable, the discovery was of the utmost importance. If I had enough time, I could have used the metal corners of the machine itself to dig a proper hole into the clay where it might hide.

Cam unshouldered all the supplies he was burdened with, shaking the basket of figs. ‘But why would she give us all of this, if it’s just a dead end?’

‘It makes sense,’ I said, sniffing my arms and enjoying the scent of life for what might be the last time. Even beneath the rosemusk I could smell ash and fire. ‘Now they can do everything in secret and not worry about rebellion. Like the mistake they made with Matty.’

‘For someone who helped crack the secret to Cold,’ Shilah said, turning to me, ‘you’re being quite glum.’ She stabbed a finger against the red on the wall. ‘Alder. Also known as Alder of Langria.’

I paused, trying to remember how I knew that word. ‘Like the plant Leroi had on his table?’

Shilah nodded.

Cam gave a blank-faced stare.

‘Look closer,’ Shilah said, beckoning us forwards. ‘This *blood* spells out a word.’

Tentatively I stepped forwards and saw that without the cover of shadow the smears did indeed look like letters.

‘It says *hope*,’ Cam read, astonished. ‘How’d you know that stuff wasn’t blood?’

‘Because all Jadans know how blood dries,’ Shilah said, pushing open the whole wall with a single thrust and revealing a much larger chamber behind, dust clouding the air.

‘Huh,’ I said, my eyes having trouble taking in everything at

once.

Cam nearly dropped the basket of figs. ‘Wow.’

‘Hurry,’ Shilah said, letting the wall close behind us and rushing forwards, practically ignoring all the sights before us that demanded admiration. The vast room itself was still encased in long clay walls, but unlike the crawlspace leading up to it, this chamber had overwhelming signs of past travellers.

The Opened Eye of the Crier was painted everywhere, in all different styles, drawn on with the same red alder as on the entrance wall. Hundreds of Eyes looked over the chamber and gave the room a hopeful air. Small assortments of trinkets and keepsakes sat along the perimeter of the walls, like shrines. Jadans were never allowed to own much, and even though the dust and neglect made it clear that none of my kin had been down here in a decade, the sense of creativity felt alive and electric.

There were makeshift dolls posed to look as if they were tearing off their slave-uniforms. And little ceramic bowls with gold paste filled the cracks around the shrines. Ragged sleeping blankets of all colours were pinned to the walls, making one broken, yet beautiful tapestry, while whistles carved out of broken cane sat poised and ready to sing. Broken hourglasses were fitted sideways so the sands would never fall, and links of rusted and shattered chains were woven between all the Opened Eyes. I saw a few taskmaster whips – obviously stolen – buried up to the hilt in the floor, as well as statues of ancient animals that must have been painstakingly chipped out of barrack bricks.

And prayers.

So many prayers, all carved directly into the walls. Words of thanks and fear and hope and pleas for guidance. They weren't all written in the common tongue of Paphos, either. There were letters I didn't recognize, ancient designs with tails and loops and dots studding the bottom lines. I couldn't stop looking around at the words, stunned by how many Jadans had been down here; all hopeful, preparing to make the journey to paradise.

Cam plucked a Wisp off one of the shrine tables. 'Someone left Cold behind.'

Shilah shrugged. 'You'd probably give anything you had too, if you knew it might help keep you safe. Sacrifice is a big thing with my people.'

'But Cold?' Cam asked. 'Wouldn't they want to use it? It's a long way North, and the Sun is even stronger there.'

Shilah shook her head, as if Cam was missing something obvious.

'What?' Cam asked, putting the Wisp back down. 'Is that offensive to touch?'

Shilah looked at me, her eyes resolute. 'The Vicaress can read, too. And I guarantee she knows the difference between alder and blood. We need to keep moving.'

I nodded, but a part of me wanted to read every single prayer down here, and touch every gift, thinking about the Jadans who might have left them behind. They'd challenged the Khat's Gospels to try their luck in this Coldmarch. They must

have believed our people were more than dirt, that we weren't supposed to be slaves.

Even without a Coldmaker, they had taken a leap.

If only they could see the machine in my arms.

'You're right,' I said, my hand trembling as I pressed it against my machine. The metal was cool to the touch, even after all that time under Sun.

Shilah quickly led us through the decorated chamber, which at the end funnelled into another small space. Before we pushed into the mouth of the new tunnel, Shilah stopped and moved her head from side to side. If possible she drew her back even straighter, whipping her braid around so it was out of her face. The walls were closer near the exit, and two tallies of names had been etched on either side.

'Lost,' I read on top of the left wall.

'Saved,' Shilah said, pointing to the right.

The 'saved' side had considerably fewer names than the 'lost' side – which had hundreds, if not thousands, of names carved in, spanning floor to ceiling. I let my eyes scan the rows top to bottom, feeling more and more dismayed the closer to the ground I got, even spotting a few 'Micahs' along the way. Had all these Jadans really been killed in the name of freedom?

And then I reached the final name on the wall.

It looked entirely fresher than the rest, scraps of clay sprinkled on the floor underneath. It must have been why Mama Jana had so much earth trapped under her cracked fingernails.

She'd scratched his name in by hand.

Abb.

Cam bent over and put a hand on my shoulder. 'I'm so sorry, Spout.'

I swallowed hard, my knees shaking as I crouched.

It's not that I didn't know he was gone, but here was the first physical proof. Not just a vision, or the Vicaress's words that could have turned out to be a lie. Here was the name of my father, the best slave I'd ever known.

Emotions tried to flood in, but I had no capacity to deal with them right now, so I swallowed them back.

It wasn't even that hard.

'Drop the bucket,' I said casually under my breath, opening the lips of my bag and showing him the invention. 'All because of you.'

'Hmm?' Cam asked.

I put the Coldmaker on the ground, and, instead of grabbing one of the Abbs already tucked into the inside pocket, I flipped the machine on.

The air in the cave quivered as my invention went to work, a cool breath drawn from the entire tunnel. Wind whipped across the shrines, the temperature changing in the room. Why the machine worked was a mystery I intended to examine, but at least for now I had a general idea. The vials were opened as the gears turned. A few tears fell on the Frost first, which sat in its Cold Charge bath. This caused the initial reaction. Then a drop of my

Jadan blood was let out at the catch-point as a starter material, where the gold gathered and bundled to form an Abb.

From a strictly inventive standpoint, the procedure was simple and straightforward, nothing other than a natural response.

Cause and effect. Simple. Emotionless.

As the new Abb came to life, I shut off the machine and plucked up the golden bead. A crisp scratching came from behind me, so I spun around and found Shilah with a long blade in her hand. It was folded steel, the silver handle ornate as they came. She was doing something to the bottom of the 'saved' wall. From my vantage it looked almost as if she was crossing a name out.

'What are you doing?' Cam asked.

Shilah finished and pressed her back to the place she'd marred, hiding the evidence. 'Let's keep moving.'

'Can I borrow that?' I asked, pointing to the blade. I was actually glad of Shilah's thievery. Mama Jana had a decent collection of blades behind the counter, and we would need it more than the shopkeeper did.

Although perhaps not if the hounds had found her.

Shilah tossed the blade at my feet. I gently prised a nook out of the second 'b' in Abb's name, big enough so as to make my own kind of shrine. I stuffed the fresh, golden Abb in the space, snug and secure, and then closed my eyes, offering a prayer I was sure was not the first of its kind to echo across these walls.

'Let's go,' Shilah said, this time gently. 'We don't know how long this next stretch of tunnel is going to be.'

‘One more thing,’ I said.

I picked an empty spot on the wall and carved in a small feather.



Chapter Four

We were stuck underground for much longer than expected.

Whoever had built this part of the Coldmarch had used the natural cracks in the land for a foundation, presumably to decrease the amount of actual digging that needed to be done. Since the Builders had used the existing spaces already waiting underground, the way through ended up being complex and disorientating. The compass told me we were zig-zagging back and forth beneath the city, quite often straying from North. Some of the natural cracks in the earth were huge, the size of Cry Temples, with sporadic holes that plunged downwards into a forever sort of darkness. Often in the distance we heard the sounds of rushing water, leaving me to wonder how close we were to the River Singe. We made sure to follow the red alder line painted at our feet so as not to get lost or stray off the designated path. In other sections the walls became incredibly congested, scarred with hundreds of scratches. I imagined the marks were from bodies and supplies trying to squeeze through.

We had no way to tell time in the darkness, but I imagined it was a few days. We stopped to sleep twice, both times finding sanctuary off the path in case the Vicaress had found her way down here. We only intended to rest for a few hours, just to gather our strength, although it was hard to judge how long we slept, since we had to extinguish the lamp each time to conserve fuel.

Shilah and I slept with our bodies pressed together, our arms linked, belts looped together. This was both for warmth, but also for safety, in case something foul tried to snatch one of us away in the dead of night. Shilah thought I was being paranoid, but she was the one who'd suggested the knotted belts. I offered to have Cam sleep on my other side, tied to us, but he kept declining, insisting on staying awake and keeping guard. I'd told him this was unnecessary, since he wouldn't be able to see, but he wouldn't listen, keeping at the edges of whatever nook in which we took refuge, constantly vigilant.

By the third leg of the trip his eyes were as red as the alder line.

He also refused to eat any more of the figs. They didn't last long anyway.

Not much was said as we made the journey. There was no reason for the silence, but I had a feeling Cam and Shilah were nervous for the same unsaid reason. None of us wanted to be the one to startle something ancient living down here in the dark. So far there had been no red eyes or grinding of unseen fangs, but anything was possible so far beneath the sands of Paphos. The world was different down here, cool and dark, and apart from the threat of Hookmen and Firegogs, it was a fitting start towards paradise. There was no Sun to bake us dry, no taskmasters waiting to scar our backs, no Nobles using our bodies for their own gain. For the Jadans who took their chances on the March, it would have been their first taste of peace.

'Do you like being called Jadans?' Cam asked, his quiet voice

thunderous after so much silence. We were trudging through a thin clay corridor with crystal cones hanging above our heads and sometimes reaching the floor. The pointy wedges made it feel as if we were threading our way through a giant mouth. There had still been no sign of the Vicarress on our heels, no flaming dagger in the dark, so we'd been able to slow the pace down a bit. The overall mood had grown a bit lighter, since, despite the constant threat of danger, we had yet to be eaten. Even I was feeling the smallest twinges of hope. Unfortunately, every time my chest tried to kindle the sensations into happiness, all I could think about were the names carved into the 'lost' wall.

I examined a particularly thick crystal tooth, wondering what sort of benefit the shiny material might have offered crushed up. Leroi would have known.

'As opposed to?' I asked Cam, ducking low as I moved away, so as not to be speared by the tip.

'Well,' Cam said, lowering his voice. 'Since the Great Drought, there's a negative connotation involved with the word.'

Shilah glared back at us.

'Not that I think anything is wrong with it,' Cam said quickly. 'It's just that I've heard my brother and uncles – and obviously my father – say "Jadan" with such hate. They make it sound *worse* than saying slave. Is there something else you want to be called? Because I'll call you that if you want.'

'What brought this on?' I asked.

'I figure if we get out of here alive then—' Cam got flustered,

the crystal cones gently reflecting the redness of his cheeks. ‘I don’t know, I thought that maybe you’d want your people to be called something else. And I could be the one to start it now. It’s dumb, sorry. Forget it.’

‘When we bring things back to how they were supposed to be,’ Shilah said with a snort, ‘just don’t call us Nobles.’

Cam adjusted the bags of supplies on his shoulder so he could avoid a crystal pillar more easily. I imagined the bags must have grown quite cumbersome after so long, not as much as my burden, but unwieldy nonetheless.

‘Just forget it,’ he said.

‘It’s considerate of you.’ I tried to sound consoling. ‘But Jadan is something to be proud of. If anything, we’ll just have to change the connotation.’

‘Whatever you need,’ Cam said, giving an agreeable bow, as low as he could manage without spilling everything. His eyes went to Shilah. ‘Just let me know.’

I stared back at him, blinking a few times. The lantern light barely reached him, and his shiny yellow hair now looked black from all the dirt and dust it had attracted.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Nothing.’ I nodded, noting his eyes had moved to the Coldmaker. ‘I believe you.’

I licked my finger and touched the nearest pillar, bringing it back to my mouth. My tongue recognized the delight better than my eyes.

‘Salt,’ I said.

Cam immediately reached up and cracked off the tip of the nearest pillar, stuffing it in the bag. Shilah shot him a look, as if reminding him we shouldn’t be drawing attention to ourselves.

Cam licked his dry lips. ‘When we get to Langria we’ll have to have a feast, and I can say I brought the free Jadans salt from the Coldmarch. As a gift.’

I smiled, although it didn’t climb past my lips.

‘And,’ Cam said with a glimmer of pride, ‘you need salt for the Coldmaker, right? To keep the Charge.’

‘Good thinking,’ I said with a nod. ‘Let’s get a few.’

Shilah shrugged, and we all snapped off a handful of salt each, adding it to Cam’s supply bag. I pressed my hands to my nose afterwards, but there wasn’t any scent.

‘Salt and Abbs and revolution,’ Cam said as we started moving again, following the alder. He immediately stopped and then gestured for Shilah to lead us, giving her a respectably wide berth. ‘It should be quite the feast.’

Our next stop took place beside a tiny stream, which had carved a shallow bed into smooth rock as it cascaded endlessly into the darkness. We’d heard the rushing waters from the alder path and wound our way to its shores to fill up our waterskins. Gentle currents had brushed the endless tunnel wide, making the passage seem both frightening and serene. The waters were some of the most delicious I’d ever tasted, possibly because they’d been kept away from Sun for an eternity. We only needed to add the

smallest slices of Abb to get them to cool.

The journey had already begun to thin Cam out, his voice hollow and cheeks sunken. I asked him to sleep. Begged him even. It ended up taking three direct commands to get him to agree to shut his eyes for one hour. I gave him much longer. While he snored, one foot hanging limp in the waters, Shilah and I talked of fragile things. She kept dipping one finger in the water and bringing it over my hand, letting the single droplets fall on the back of my palm. She did this until the puddle at my feet trickled its way back to the source, rarely meeting my eyes as we spoke.

We talked of meeting out in the dunes behind my barracks, when I invited her to join our family, but instead she disappeared out into the sands. She told me she used the Rope Shoes that I'd traded her for the Khatmelon quite a bit, which is something I'd always wondered. We joked about the days working with Leroi back in the Tavor tinkershop, hiding under the floor grate whenever anyone unfamiliar came knocking. We discussed at length all the plants she'd cultivated for Little Langria. About where she got the soil and seeds, and vines. About the humour of the weaver beetles that lived on her persimmons. She asked about the feather I'd scratched into the wall, and I told her about Matty and the board game we were creating; how close we'd come to finishing. About how Moussa, Matty, and I lessened the harsh tinge of the day by playing 'whatsit', where we made up stories to go along with the shapes of our bruises. She told me of the time she visited the Hotland Delta, having stowed away on a

merchant ship. About how the High Nobles there had a certain ritual that they performed each night to pay tribute to the Crier. Each Sundown they would fold little boats out of Droughtweed and sail them along the Singe, a single Wisp floating in each hull. Shilah's smirk was stupendous as she told me how she would wait downstream with a net to collect the boats. Over the course of a week she'd made a small fortune.

I told her what it was like with such a large family.

She told me what it was like to live alone.

We didn't mention my father or her mother once.

Some things can live delicately in memory, but shatter when put into words.

We didn't have much fuel left for the lantern, so I had to wake up Cam sooner than I would have liked. He whimpered at my touch, but when he grew conscious his face hardened and he sprang to his feet, grabbing our supply bags and empty basket of figs, leading us back to the path.

Finally, after more endless tunnels, the single red line led us to our escape. The sleek and spindly cave once again widened into a proper chamber, funnelling us towards an actual way out. The wooden slab was slanted so much it was nearly horizontal, and no light spilled in through the cracks on the sides, but it looked like salvation nonetheless.

Wiping the layered crust of dirt from my forehead, I debated thanking the Crier for getting us here alive – but I decided that I was only ready to open one door at a time right now.

Cam pointed to the tilted door in front of us and the buckets sitting at its base, lowering his voice. 'Where do you think it lets out?'

'Honestly,' I said, matching his volume. 'I've been so turned around this entire time I have no clue.'

Shilah brought the lantern over to the door, where something was written in more alder. As she scanned the lines, her lips moved and I couldn't help but notice how full and plump they were. My focus shifted to her hair, long and tattered and matted with dirt. And her eyes, spilling over with all the sad things she'd already seen in this world.

'Imagine if we didn't have a lantern,' Cam said quietly. 'And we had to do this whole thing in the dark.'

'We almost did,' I said, pointing to the oil reserves, which were dangerously low.

'Right now we're at the edge of the Drylands, just North of Paphos,' Shilah read. 'Two days' walk until the next stop on the Coldmarch. The shack is in the bottom of the three-humped valley, and will be marked by a green streak over the threshold.' She turned to us with pinched lips, pointing to the empty buckets. 'It says please take all the water and Cold we need. And may the Crier watch over our family.'

'Two days.' Cam did the sums in his head, looking into the bag of supplies. 'No food, but plenty of water. Should we wait until night-time to leave?'

Shilah peered back into the dark chamber, the shadows

flickering and ominous. ‘Not sure we’ll have until night.’

Pressing my fingers against the door, I found that it didn’t have much give. There was no latch to undo, and the hinges told me that it was set up to swing outwards.

‘We need to push together,’ I said.

Gathering ourselves, we gave the door a hard, collective shove. The pressure should have made the wood budge at least, but it was immovable.

‘Is it locked?’ Cam asked. ‘Want to try the trick with Ice in the lock again, Spout?’

I ran my fingernail around the cracks at the edges of the door, noting the gritty sand. ‘I don’t think there’s a lock. Just ten years of sand pressing down on the other side.’

‘You think we’re under a dune?’ Shilah asked, crossing her arms.

‘I took a girl to see the Drylands once,’ Cam said, looking down and scratching the back of his neck. ‘And from what I remember they’re pretty barren, but it’s possible the dunes have shifted.’

Shilah put a hand on the door, as if to ask it through touch. ‘I don’t think it would let out so close to the dunes. Maybe the Khat barred it from the other side when he found out?’

Cam put both arms on the door and shoved again, the vein in his neck showing heavily through his light skin. He started pounding on the door with his shoulder to try to get more leverage, but I quickly put a hand on his arm to stop him.

‘We have to be quiet and strong,’ I said. ‘We don’t know what’s out there.’

We all tried to push at the same time again, but the door wouldn’t budge more than a hair upwards. It was then I noticed the middle of the wood distending inwards, gently caving under all the weight.

‘Wait,’ I said, remembering myself. ‘Let me see that knife.’

Shilah reached under her dress and unstrapped the knife from her thigh. She handed over the blade and I tried not to think about the heat lingering in the metal.

Cam stared at the blade, his eyes softening.

‘In case of the Vicaress?’ she asked. ‘You still think this is a trap?’

‘No,’ I said, going to work on the door’s hinges. ‘I’m just trying to think like an Inventor.’

Leroi had taught me that when it came to tinkering, sometimes the best answer was also the simplest. The door may have been intended to open upwards, but Inventors worked with their own intentions. After a flurry of careful twisting and prising, the hinges groaned, letting me know things were about to give.

‘Get back,’ I warned, heart pounding as I gave the blade back to Shilah and reluctantly handed the Coldmaker over to Cam.

I made the final twists by hand, and the metal cracked, the horizontal door giving way under an explosion of sand. An entire dune practically spilled into the cavern and pushed me backwards. Smacking my head against the wall, everything went

a hazy beige as I tumbled to the ground, instantly buried up to my waist.

Things settled, and my head throbbed as I spat the sand out of my cheeks.

Arms threaded beneath mine, helping me up and out of the slice of dune, and hoisting me through the threshold. Shilah said something by way of appreciation, but my head was still ringing too heavily to make it out.

My friends kept a steady hold of both my sides, carrying me back into the glaring Sunlight, where I shook the sand out of my ears. Indeed, we had emerged North of the city, the brown land compact and walkable. There were plenty of boulders for cover, although the air up here tasted more dead and dusty than I was used to. Once I had found my footing, I took a look back at distant Paphos, just barely able to make out the web of streets and monuments and barracks and shops and temples and walled gardens and High Noble Manors and the First Khat's Pyramid, all built on the backs and blood of my people.

'Come on, Inventor,' Shilah said, gripping my elbow. 'We should get moving. We won't be safe until we get to that shack.'

I nodded to the city, promising I'd be back to set it free.

And then we marched North.



Chapter Five

‘Sunlash and blisters,’ Cam said, hunching over as we reached the rocky face of the next hill. ‘How many is that now, Spout?’

I paused, trying to come up with something poetic. ‘As many as the freedom songs they sing in Langria.’

Cam tried to smile, but ended up wincing, his lips crimson and blistered. He had one of Mama Jana’s sunscarves wrapped around his head, keeping his delicate yellow hair tucked away. There were other shirts in the bag, but Cam insisted on wearing a green blouse pulled over his robe, as he claimed it let in more air.

‘I like that one,’ Cam panted, covering his lips with his fingers. Sweat dripped down both his cheeks, which had begun to freckle.

I nodded, continuing to hum under my breath with each step. I finally realized that I’d been humming the Jadan’s Anthem along with each step. It was the song Moussa, Matty, and I had created in my barracks, back when my childhood was torturous, yet somehow strangely whole.

The melody was sharp and painful. I didn’t stop.

Cam took off his glasses and wiped the sweat from the lenses. His red face and struggling frame made me realize how well my people had adjusted to this harsh world. How we had been *forced* to adjust. My skin was dark and leathered, hardened by the strong glare of the Sun, and I was still wiry from the years of scavenging the city for tinkering supplies. Even though Cam’s people were

deemed ‘*Worthy*’, it was the Jadans that could withstand treks under a merciless sky.

‘How long do I have to wait before the next one?’ Cam asked, wincing against the Sun.

‘Not long,’ I said.

To pass the endless monotony, we’d invented the Game of Paces. Since there were really no landmarks to judge how far we’d gone, we decided to keep track of the steps taken. There was a distinct possibility that there was nothing out here, that the shack had been swallowed by the dunes or burned down by the Khat, and that we would need an escape plan. So for fun we matched our steps to certain things in the World Cried, starting with small numbers like *figs in a garden* and *stones in the Pyramid*. By the end of the first day we had reached things like *beetles in Paphos* and *Jadan whippings*. Now, on the second day of hard walking, our numbers were so incredibly high that we had to get creative.

Water rations were tight, and since we found nothing living in the sands, our stomachs had already begun to harmonize their grumbles. The hunger hadn’t been so bad last night, as we’d all passed out at the sight of good shelter – three huge boulders that came together to make a little nook – but it was hitting hard today. Cam had taken to chewing on strips of boilweed, and Shilah had begun to spend more and more time with her hand resting on her stomach. I’d been trying to keep track of how much water we went through each stop, and judging by the diminishing

weight of the skins, I knew that soon we were going to buckle against the point of no return. The Sun was laughing at us, only getting stronger the further North we walked, its rays cracking down like fiery whips. The irony was that we had as much Cold as we needed, glorious, miracle Ice, but right now I doubted we'd have enough water to make it back the way we'd come.

I think both Cam and Shilah were aware of this, but they helped keep up the pretence, smiling through the dread.

'That's quite a few freedom songs,' Shilah said with a raise of her eyebrow. 'To sing that many they must not have stopped since the Great Drought.'

I adjusted the Coldmaker again, the machine heavy and the metal edge continuing to dig into my hip. I had a feeling I'd be walking with a permanent crook if we ever made it through the March.

'I imagine that's true,' I said softly.

I rubbed the sore spot on the back of my head, looking out over so much dead land and consulting the compass. Mama Jana had been savvy enough to put in our supplies. We were still headed due North, but the barren sands and rocks weren't showing any signs of letting up. As far as I could tell, this was a fool's journey. We would surely perish, and the Coldmaker was going to be lost out in the middle of nowhere, along with any hope for the Jadan people.

'This is brutal,' Cam said, wiggling his toes underneath his sandals. 'It's like I stepped on a pile of needles, and the Sun is

trying to lick my bones.’

‘Welcome to life as a Jadan runaway,’ Shilah said, unfazed and standing tall on the flattened stretch of earth. ‘Enough of this suffering and maybe you will start understanding us.’

I had to admit it was a smart idea to have the Coldmarch positioned here, since no taskmasters would ever be caught out in this nightmarish terrain for no reason. The ground near Paphos had started as compact and easy, but the March had taken us across thick dunes, unstable rock faces, and the vertical climbs of the Drylands, all in the name of secrecy. I had yet to see any bleached bones sticking up from the sands, but I doubted all of the brave Jadans who’d attempted this journey had made it through.

The only benefit of this treacherous terrain was that the land here was not even, meaning frequent patches of cool shadow in which to rest. But all the shade in the World Cried wouldn’t matter if we ran out of water.

‘I bet they’ll have groan salve at this next stop,’ I told Cam. ‘Mama Jana said this Split is a Pedlar, and Pedlars have everything. You’ll barely feel the burns tomorrow.’

Cam nodded, taking a breath before standing up again. ‘I’ll call it penance.’

‘Maybe you Nobles just aren’t *worthy* of the March,’ Shilah said.

‘Shilah,’ I said, shooting her a stern look. ‘Stop. Cam is family, and he saved us both. Don’t forget that.’

She looked poised to argue, but bit her bottom lip, and eventually nodded.

‘And correct me if I’m wrong,’ I continued, the timing perfect. ‘But doesn’t that look like the tip of a three-humped valley in the distance?’

Cam gave me a thankful look, his glasses still in his hand. ‘You’ll have to describe it to me. Things are a bit fuzzy at the moment.’

‘Three humps in the rocks and sand,’ I said, smiling for what felt like the first time since we’d started walking. ‘Just like the alder writing said.’

‘Shall we celebrate with Cold water all round?’ Cam asked, his whole demeanour changing in an instant, looking practically giddy. ‘We earned it.’

Before Shilah or I could answer, Cam gave a frantic nod, answering himself.

‘Why, yes, Camlish, what a delightful offer. Thank you!’ He rubbed his hands together eagerly. ‘You’re most welcome, Camlish. You’ve always had the finest taste in celebrations.’

‘Fine, but not all of it,’ Shilah warned gently, rolling her eyes. ‘It’s been ten years since the Coldmarch shut down. We don’t even know if there’s anyone down in that valley.’

I reached into the Coldmaker bag, fishing for the side pocket where I kept the Abbs. ‘Maybe not, but if this Split is still around, then it’s another person we can share—’

My wrist exploded with pain.

I snatched my hand out of the bag. The sting was too overwhelming for me to even form a shout. My throat immediately closed up. Even though my tongue was silent, I could feel my arm howling.

‘Spout,’ Cam said, frowning. ‘You okay? You cut yourself?’

I was unable to answer. The shock was still registering, pain increasing with every rapid pump of my heart. My wrist looked normal at first, but after an instant, two puncture marks began to make themselves known, my dark skin rising and bubbling from the venom.

I dropped the Coldmaker far harder than I should have, the machine giving an angry clank. The canvas lips of the bag fell open, and a baby Sobek lizard skittered from the bag. It looked up at me unafraid, its tiny red eyes glistening in the Sun. The scales around its neck puffed up, as if readying itself for another bite, although I already knew a second one couldn’t do me further harm.

I was as good as dead.

‘Oh,’ Cam spurted. ‘Oh no. That’s really small.’

I snatched my wrist up to my lips and began sucking out the venom, my heart thundering and my head clouding with fear. Run-ins with Sobeks were common, and I’d been bitten before, but always by an adult lizard. The grown ones knew only to release a bit of venom in a single bite – meaning a night of vomiting and cramps for the victim – which was bad enough.

This was far worse.

Young lizards always emptied their entire poison sacs at once, not yet knowing how to control their portions.

Sobek lizards are a nuisance.

Their babies are assassins.

My tongue began to fizz with pain at the edges.

Shilah was quick, pinning down the creature with her sandal and cutting off the back half of its tail. Normally she was reverent of all living things, so I knew hurting a Sobek would not have been an easy thing for her to do.

Cam's face scrunched in frightened confusion as the lizard skittered away, unharmed by the loss of its tail.

'For the medicine,' Shilah said, her face severe. 'They say it's always best if you mix in some of the creature itself.'

I tried to say that it was true, that Abb had imparted that same bit of wisdom, but words were no longer possible.

Cam's face went mad, tearing at his headscarf. 'What do we do? How do we make medicine?'

Shilah didn't answer, pocketing the tail and rushing to my side.

'Alternate with me,' she said, bringing my wrist to her lips and somehow keeping calm. 'Five spits each. I'm right here. This isn't going to stop us.'

I nodded, feeling the Sun's rays pulsing with menace. The baby lizard must have crawled into the bag while we were passing through the caves, as they usually didn't stray far from water supplies.

But why hadn't I noticed it until now?

Perhaps this was *my* penance: punishment for trying to change things.

Shilah wrapped her lips around the punctures. She sucked hard, and the pressure was excruciating, like a shard of glass being driven out of my wrist. She pulled deep five times, spitting after each, rubbing her tongue on her sleeve.

I took a deep breath and went to take my turn, but the pain was too much, the wound burning like hot iron, and I flinched away.

‘Let me do it,’ Cam said, coming over and taking my wrist. He took one deep pull of the poison and then started coughing violently. ‘It’s like burning coals!’

‘Move,’ Shilah said, pushing him aside. She looked me right in the eyes as she grabbed my wrist. ‘You’re going to be okay, World Partner.’

Her words were slurred, and I knew her tongue had gone numb as well.

I nodded, but my forehead wasn’t feeling as confident. I was heating up to a dangerous degree, beads of sweat falling into my eyes and sprouting all down my infected arm.

This was the end.

Cam breathed heavily, his face lost to fear.

‘Micah,’ Shilah said, gripping harder. Her words were slurred from the poison, but her eyes were focused and sharp. ‘You’re going to be okay.’

I pointed down to the valley with a shaking hand.

Shilah nodded with understanding and went back to work

extracting the poison. She reached her limit after three more pulls, her lips flooding with colour and swelling. Scooping a hand against the ground, she sprinkled a layer of sand over her tongue and then angled my arm up.

‘Kpp it elvted.’ She spat. ‘Make th bld wrk to rech the wwnd.’

‘What can I do?’ Cam asked, checking the Coldmaker bag for more lizards before tossing it over his shoulder. ‘How can I help? Tell me what to do!’

‘Kpp up,’ she said, wrenching my arm and dragging me forwards.

We sprinted all the way to the middle of the three humps of the valley, my legs shaking. The pain in my arm was so furious that it almost felt like pleasure, which I knew wasn’t a good sign. My vision was starting to swim and everything had taken on a beige hue – something that had never happened with any other Sobek bite. Hope was quickly draining with each step.

Down at the bottom of the steep valley was a stout shack huddling in shadow. Attached to the side was a small wooden stable, a beige snout poking out, dipping into a water trough.

Is that a hound? I thought, trying to pick out any red eyes through the haze. *Did the Vicarress beat us here?*

‘You see that?’ Shilah asked, nodding down, clarity in her voice returning. ‘I think it’s a camel.’

‘It’s alive,’ Cam said. ‘Which means someone must be home.’

Shilah grabbed my wrist and drew out three more pulls of poison and blood, but I couldn’t feel her lips this time.

‘Yrr gong to be okay,’ she said, wiping her mouth.

My legs began to buckle. I turned to Cam, pointing to the Coldmaker, thinking maybe Ice could help. I was taken aback by the sight of my arm, which was riddled with sweat. Like the boiling bubbles that ran along the top of the Singe.

Shilah pinched the skin on the back of my neck, jolting me out of the fog. ‘Stop being dramatic. You’re going to be okay. I’m not going to Langria without you. And I’m *going* to Langria.’

She was stronger than I thought, or maybe *I* was stronger, because we made it to the bottom of the valley without me falling over and passing out, the land growing more solid the deeper we traversed. I knew I needed to stay awake, to keep from death’s alleyway, or I’d be gone forever.

‘No green mark over the door,’ Cam said as we stepped in front of the shack. ‘You think this is the right shack?’

‘Are you kidding me?’ Shilah asked, pounding the door with the palm of her hand. ‘You see any other shacks around?’

I wasn’t able to peel my eyes away from the stable. The snout poked out further, revealing a beast with kind eyes, accentuated with long, thick eyelashes and knotted tufts of fur awning its forehead. The creature reminded me of a camel, but it was much smaller, the tufts at its neck lumpier. It’s head only reached my chin, and it stuck out a pink tongue playfully, wiggling it in my direction.

I stuck mine out as well, but I couldn’t get it to wiggle.

Shilah pounded the door again.

‘You ever see one of those before?’ I asked my friends, smiling at the beast. I much preferred this creature to the hounds that were probably still on our trail. ‘I think it wants to be friends.’

No one answered me.

The words were only in my head.

‘The secret is tears,’ I whispered silently to the camel. ‘Isn’t that funny?’

‘That’s not the only secret,’ the camel responded, ruffling its furry neck. ‘I know your name.’

I laughed, wondering why only I could hear the little camel.

‘He doesn’t look so good,’ Cam said, snapping his fingers in my face. ‘Micah, you still with us?’

Cam’s face was a beige smear.

Shilah kicked at the door now. ‘Hello! Please, we need your help!’

The door opened just a crack, enough for us to find a very sharp arrow pointing at Shilah’s forehead.

‘No,’ a gruff voice inside the shack said.

‘Yes,’ the camel whispered.

Down at our feet a heavy smoke curled out of the opening of the door. The black cloud was like an old scar. A shameful part of me wanted to drop to my stomach and start huffing, as it would certainly make the journey to my death more pleasant.

What’s the opposite of penance? I wondered to myself.

‘We’re here for the Coldmarch,’ Shilah said, unafraid and standing tall.

The arrow lowered to point at her mouth.

A pause from inside, the smoke continuing to escape. ‘No.’

‘No what?’ Shilah asked.

‘That’s not a real thing. I never heard of no blasted Coldmarch.’

‘Mama Jana sent us,’ Shilah said. ‘And my friend here has been bitten by a Sobek. We need your help.’

The arrow shook. ‘He’ll live. Tell him to suck it up. Least it’s not a sand-viper.’

Shilah grabbed the severed lizard tail out of her pocket and held it up. ‘It was a baby.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t have been out in the sands if you didn’t want to get bit. Go back to your barracks and get medicine there, damned Jadans.’

Even through my fog of panic I found it interesting that he used the word ‘Jadans’ instead of slaves.

Cam nudged Shilah out of the way, stepping in front of the arrow and puffing up in the haughty way at which High Nobles tended to excel. I wanted to laugh, as the billowy green flutter-ropes wasn’t helping to toughen his image.

‘Sir, I’m Camlish Tavor, first in line for my House, and I’m escorting these Jadans on the Coldmarch.’

‘No such thing as a Coldmarch,’ the voice growled. ‘Now take your spoiled, High Noble ass back to your daddy, *Tavor*.’

The miniature camel began grunting loudly in its stable, the overhanging tuft of fur on its forehead spilling into its eyes.

‘Hush, Picka!’ the man grunted. ‘Thisn’t none of your business.’

Picka, I thought with a grin as I wandered over to it, looking into its long face. What a fine name for a talking camel. *Hello, Picka.*

‘Hello. Thank you,’ the camel said with a smirk in its eyes. ‘*Micah.*’

‘My friends call me Spout,’ I said with a bow, wondering if the camel was pronouncing my name funnily on purpose, or if it just couldn’t make the sounds with its large, lolling tongue. ‘You can call me Spout. It reminds me of my father.’

Shilah caught me under the arms as I fell, keeping me upright. I glanced down and saw that my feet were now two large sweat bubbles.

‘Look, sir,’ Cam said, giving an arrogant bow. ‘I appreciate your discretionary behaviour, obviously a necessity for such a position as yours, but we know very well that you’re Split the—’

The arrow released, impaling the bag on Cam’s shoulder. I imagined most of our supplies had just been compromised in one single blow.

‘Drat,’ the man said with a menacing tone. ‘Missed.’

‘Please, won’t you help us, sir?’ Cam asked with a gulp.

‘No such thing as a Coldmarch,’ the voice inside warned, grunting a few times before another arrow appeared. ‘And I’m pretty sure I don’t miss twice.’

I wanted to reach out and touch the arrow to see if it was

actually dripping with honey, or if that was just my imagination.

‘You dare threaten someone of House Tavor?’ Cam asked, aghast.

A silver token hopped out of the crack in the door, landing on the ground with the crest face up. I hadn’t seen a coin like that since the days of endless errands as a Street Jadan, and all of a sudden I was back on my corner, the Vicaress parading around a group of my chained, young, and scared kin.

‘*You* dare bother someone from House Suth?’ the voice inside said in an imitation of Cam’s arrogant tone. ‘You hold no sway here, boy.’

The camel gave a throaty grumble, broken in frantic brays.

The arrow pointed down at Shilah’s throat. ‘I’m closing the door now.’

Cam’s face was all fire. ‘Sir, I demand you lower your weapon and talk to us about the Coldmarch.’

The smoke at our ankles had stopped drifting out. ‘Scarabs on your shitty demands, Tavor.’

‘Please,’ Cam said, breaking into panic. ‘We went through the tunnels beneath her shop, we saw the red alder—’

‘Say it, *Micah*,’ Picka whispered to me. ‘Remember? You should say it now.’

I heard my father’s voice beneath the words of the camel, which was disconcerting, but didn’t stop me from taking the advice.

My throat opened just long enough to allow the prayer.

'Shemma hares lahyim—'

The arrow swung to me, pointed right between my eyes.

'You don't finish that sentence, slave!'

At least the words were real this time, and not just in my mind.

More importantly I'd struck a chord, his words cracked with emotion down the middle. I had to use my tongue before it hopped out of my mouth and grew wings.

'Shemma hares lahyim criyah—'

'I mean it!' The man was at full alarm. 'Not another word, or I shoot!'

Shilah reached over and put a hand on my lower back to get me to stop, but I knew what I had to do, even if my vision was slowly narrowing to a pinpoint, and my arm felt as if it had been buried at the bottom of the dunes.

'Shemma hares lahyim criyah Meshua ris yim slochim.'

'DAMN EVERYTHING TO BLEACHED BONES AND SHRIVELLED TONGUES, FINE!'

The arrow disappeared and the door was flung open by way of a swift boot kick. The man stormed out, revealing a paunchy stomach, thin and wispy hair, and a nose that was craggier than our way back to Paphos. After closer inspection, I realized this man was also another beige smear. Everything was beige now, actually.

'Fine. The Coldmarch is real,' the smudge said. 'I'm Split the Pedlar. Is that what you want to hear, you little brats? Years of peace you just upended. Now get your friend inside and—'

Beige went black.



Chapter Six

‘In your opinion,’ I said, putting the vial marked ‘Gales breath’ back in its potion slot, ‘what are the most important ones to know?’

Leroi crossed his arms, something the Head Tinkerer did quite often. ‘All of them.’

‘No, I know that,’ I said, turning away from the cabinet full of solutions and giving him a smile. ‘But I mean the most important specifically for inventing.’

Leroi gave me an incredulous look, raising an eyebrow.

I selected the next vial, marked ‘Crushed Marjoram’, and tapped at the bright green powder, a colour I’d only ever seen in Noble eyes. ‘I know it’s important to recognize them all, but we can’t really use *everything* for inventing. So what I meant is, what are the things in this cabinet to focus on for our line of work?’

Leroi sat back on his chair and crossed one leg over the other, giving a ponderous scratching of his goatee, looking around the Tavor tinkershop. ‘What is it that you think we do, Spout?’

‘Make things,’ I said with a shrug. ‘With metal, and gears, and Cold Charges.’

‘And that’s it?’

I shrugged. ‘Obviously not, but you know what I mean.’

‘Course I do. But just because you’re Jadan don’t think I’m going to take it easy on you.’

I laughed. 'I don't think that's ever been the case.'

Leroi spread his rough facial hair down at the corners of his moustache. I expected him at least to smile at my joke, but his eyes had become distant and heavy. 'I imagine that's true.'

I nodded, taking out the next vial, with was filled with preserved newtworms from the Hotland Delta. I shook the glass, wondering how much better Jadankind would be if, like these slimy creatures, we didn't need Cold to survive. I wondered how much Leroi had already experimented with these life forms, trying to discover their secrets.

'What you have to remember,' Leroi said, 'is that you will never be finished learning. You will never have only certain things to focus on.'

I put the newtworm vial back. 'What do you mean?'

Leroi sighed, taking his hand away from his face and wiggling his fingers. 'Art. Inventing is art. The hands of Creation itself. Sometimes you work for the hand of the Crier, sometimes for —' He stopped himself, shaking his head. 'Sorry, you don't need to hear that nonsense. What I mean is, your life isn't going to be like the Builders or the Patch Jadans or even the Domestics, with certain quotas to fill or tasks to be completed. Inventing is not like other lines of work. There's no cap, no finishing. Inventors don't get to specialize in paint, or words, or music, or clay, we work with *all* of reality itself. Creation to destruction. You need to know *everything*, and you can never know everything. You need to know that Golemstone reacts violently with Milk of the

Dunai. You need to know at what pressure Glassland Black will shatter, and at what temperature it will melt. You need to know how many ounces of Halia's elixir will dissolve diamonds, or how many drops will make a grown man scream. You need to know your metals and poisons and your powders and your mathematics and your poems, dammit, you need to know what the world needs, Micah, what Jadans need, and Nobles, too, and what this desecrated, Sun-damned, piece of—'

Cool water splashed my face, snapping me awake. My mouth instinctively gaped, collecting all the water it could. I sputtered and choked as it washed down my throat, but it felt wonderful against my burning tongue. Everything was still out of focus, and I blinked wildly, trying to figure out where I was.

'There. He's alive,' a voice announced. 'Now we get this over with.'

'Give him some time, man.'

A throaty grumble.

'Spout.'

A snap of fingers in my ears, then pressure on my chest, rubbing back and forth.

'We can have him ride Picka. She's small, but strong enough for your little friend. If the Khat's hounds are on the scent, we need to move.' Another grumble. 'Can't believe you got me into this.'

I finally heard Shilah's voice: 'Spout.'

'Do you know if the baby Sobek bites can have lasting effects?'

Cam asked.

‘How should I know?’ the gruff voice asked. ‘If you’re smart, you avoid the damned things.’

I blinked again, wiping the water off my face, and three bodies came into focus above. Shilah and Cam were pressed against each other, vying for the spot closest to my side. Cam smiled, giving me a rather sheepish wave. He still hadn’t changed out of the loose fluttering robe and blouse and looked like a green cloud. Shilah was straight-faced and standing tall, but her hand was resting gently on my ankle.

My arm was now covered in a waxy cotton, soaked red all the way through. I imagined Split the Pedlar wasn’t nearly as proficient with needle and gut as my father, whose stitches almost never leaked.

I felt a wave of nausea, and my body spasmed under the weight of falling memories. I whimpered once, but disguised the next sound by sitting up and coughing, keeping my eyes averted. I pressed down hard over the cloth on my wrist and doubled the pain shooting up my arm. This flushed my mind of anything other than pure physical agony.

‘Don’t do that, kid!’ Split demanded. ‘You’ll ruin the stitches! You think this house is made of needle and gut?’

I didn’t listen, pressing even harder, digging my fingernails through the cloth. It was working. After a few more fake coughs my composure returned.

The first thing that I noticed was that the shack was rather

dull for a Pedlar. The bare walls were decorated with splinters and flecked paint, and the empty shelves were stocked only with dust. The bed was a simple boilweed mattress, with no sleeping sheet. This was unlike the lavish silk accommodations I imagined all High Nobles slept on. A healing box sat open on the counter – recently rifled through – but I couldn't see any food in the kitchen.

The one oddity that struck me was the wooden Khatclock in the corner, smaller than Mama Jana's, but equipped with the same time-locked hands hanging over the Closed Eye face.

Hands that pointed North.

I gave the broken clock a nod, as it told me we were at least in the right place. 'Are you still a Pedlar?'

Split grunted. 'Hmm? What's that?'

'It's pretty empty in here.' I worked my jaw and lifted my face enough finally to get a good look at the man. 'Did you sell everything you own?'

He crossed his hairy arms, tapping his thumbs against his soft chest. The stout man had the look of someone who could have once picked up his camel, but was now more likely to pick up a plate of cheese. Fair and flabby skin hung loose around his neck, and his belly protruded over his waist. A receding hairline tugged back the top of his head, which was bald and burned red from exposure. Beady eyes were sunken in beside his crooked nose, and his waxen face was chiselled with a deep frown. He wore a hollow sort of sadness I'd seen only once before.

‘I peddle big piles of “you’re alive thanks to me”,’ Split grumbled. ‘So stop asking dumb questions that don’t matter, and get off your ass and let’s get going.’

I had a feeling my friends had yet to show him the Coldmaker.

Cam scowled. ‘Spout is alive because Shilah got so much of the venom out. You even said so yourself.’

Shilah’s cheeks flushed just a little bit darker.

Split waved a dismissive hand. ‘I said she helped. Your sweaty friend here would be a blathering pile of useless meat if not for me. Now let’s cut the chat and get my section of the March over with, before the hounds eat all of our faces off.’

‘Lovely,’ Cam said. ‘Now hold still, Spout, let me check that burn.’

He leaned in and wrapped a hand around the back of my neck. Forehead to forehead, he whispered so low that only I could hear. ‘Don’t use your real name.’

I pondered for an instant and then nodded, deciding it was probably wise. ‘It’s fine,’ I said at normal volume. ‘It doesn’t hurt any more.’

Cam stood up and gave Shilah a secretive wink.

‘I thought you said there was no such thing as the Coldmarch,’ I said to Split, testing the waters.

Split went red. ‘Listen, kid. I don’t know what you think you know, but you basically just left the womb. Maybe you were a really good errand boy in the city, finding colourful parasols on sale in the Market Quarters for ungrateful Nobles’ – he did a

fancy twiddle with his fingers and then pointed to Cam – ‘or rushing towels to his bare-butt relatives in their baths, but you’ve never been outside Paphos. This is the Drylands, boy, this is where stupid young Jadans step on baby Sobek lizards, and then they die.’

Cam looked as if he was about to melt under the heat of his own fury, but I found myself drawn to Split, especially after seeing the Droughtweed pit cut into the middle of his floor. The ashes within the charred grey leaves were still smouldering. A small part of me wished just a bit of the smoke would waft my way and help ease both the burning in my throat and the stabbing in my wrist.

Split followed my eyes, his face getting even darker. ‘You going to judge the High Noble who just saved your life? You know what, I don’t care if you knew the sacred words, or that you were picked by Mama Jana, I don’t have to—’

I waved him off with a bleak smile. ‘I’m not judging. You and I are kin. Broken kin.’

Split huffed, but his face softened a bit. Tiny red lines cut the whites of his eyes, and his fingers absently scratched at his thigh. I never got so dependent that I scratched, but I knew plenty who did.

‘How’s your arm, Spout?’ Shilah asked, cutting in and gently holding the back of my hand.

‘I’m okay,’ I lied, the whole left side of my body throbbing. ‘Is the Coldmake—’

Shilah shook her head, cutting me off. ‘Yes. The *World Crier* has been watching over us.’

‘World Crier,’ Split said with a huff, and then clapped his hands. ‘Yeah, there’s a chuckle. Now let’s get this over with. And I hope you know I’m only in charge of taking you to the next stop on the March. Did Mama Jana tell you that? The flock always get passed to another Shepherd at Gilly’s, so I’m not responsible for you once we get there.’ Then he grumbled under his breath. ‘Just letting you know now, there ain’t going to be any other Shepherds left. But that’s your problem, not mine.’

‘*You’re* still a Shepherd,’ Cam pointed out.

Split kept scratching, the other thigh this time. ‘You forced my hand.’

I brought my wounded wrist against my chest and pointed to the Coldmaker bag in the corner, looking at Cam. ‘I assume you waited to show him our *supplies*?’

‘You sure he needs to know about our *supplies*?’ Shilah asked pointedly.

Cam nodded. ‘Up to Spout. It’s his miracle.’

Shilah tensed up at the declaration, her face turning sour.

Split looked about as confused as you could get, his thick face going red. ‘What miracle you blathering about? Miracle that you’re alive? That’s not a miracle. That’s a decrease in my healing supplies. Which Mama Jana is going to pay for, by the way.’

‘He should know about it,’ I said to my friends, deciding to take the gamble. Our secret was too powerful to hide anyway. I

wanted the world to know. I wanted every Jadan and every Noble to know the truth that would set us all free.

Cam hesitated before reaching into the bag, and then he tossed me one of the Abbs.

‘S’that gold?’ Split said, finally a hint of interest in his face. ‘You know it’s customary to give something of value to your Shepherd.’

The Ice was going to make one of two things happen. Either the Pedlar would slit our throats and take the machine for himself, or he’d sober up with hope. Once this man had dedicated his life to saving Jadan. Maybe I could return the favour.

Shilah’s brow furrowed, her hand running along the end of her braid. ‘That so? Mama Jana didn’t mention that.’

‘Well, I imagine you never been on the Coldmarch before,’ Split said, looking away, his fingers scratching harder at his leg. ‘And also you’re not allowed to look at me, girl. Not for the whole trip. That’s got to be part of the deal.’

Shilah raised an eyebrow.

‘May I have a cup of water, please?’ I asked Split with a blank face, even though my heart was pounding.

‘*More* water?’ Split asked, glancing at the Khatclock. ‘You think I’m made of Wisps?’

‘You *did* destroy our supplies with an arrow,’ Cam said. ‘And you’re a High Noble. Which, as we both know, comes with a weekly stipend from the Pyramid. So technically yes, you are made of Wisps.’

‘Just water, please, Split,’ I said, shooting Cam a disapproving look. ‘No Cold.’

Split went still and then grumbled something about a well behind the shack. Grabbing a bucket coiled with rope, he barrelled through the front door and kicked it closed behind him.

I went to open my mouth, but Shilah cut me off. ‘You sure you want to show him what our machine can do?’ She pointed to the nook in the centre of the floor, a haze of smoke still rising. ‘You can’t trust Droughtweed.’

‘You still have that knife?’ I asked.

Shilah tapped her thigh.

‘I trust *you* to keep us safe,’ I said. I tried to stand up, but I was still a little woozy. ‘Keep it close.’

Cam came over and helped me to my feet. ‘What do you think of the name Mordechiah?’

Maybe it was the lingering Sobek poison, but I couldn’t follow. ‘Mordechiah?’

‘For your fake name,’ Cam said, peeking through the healing box on the table. ‘It still starts with an “M” so it’ll be easy to remember.’

The old me would have laughed, but all of a sudden the pain in my wrist was extraordinary.

‘No!’ I spat, my stomach stewing with something thick and sour. ‘No.’

Cam’s head dropped. ‘Sorry, I just—’

‘No,’ I said, holding up my wrist. ‘It’s just really painful. And

I think I'll stick with Spout.'

'Spout's a nickname, though,' Cam said, lifting his eyes just a bit. 'What if he asks your real name?'

'Clearly Split is a nickname too,' Shilah said. 'But I think that kind of stuff must have been common on the Coldmarch. Fake names and disguises.'

Cam shrugged, a bit of colour returning to his cheeks. 'So you think Split's going to faint when he sees the Ice?'

'Maybe,' I said, looking around again at the bareness of the shack, nursing my wrist against my chest. 'What do you think he used to peddle?'

Shilah was over by the Khatclock now, tapping at the glass. 'Probably Droughtweed. Lots of profit in addiction.'

Cam gestured around at the bare walls and decrepit ceiling. 'This shack doesn't exactly scream Cold.'

Shilah continued to tap on the face of the Khatclock, the glass nearly silent against the calloused pads of her fingers. 'You think this leads to some secret tunnel as well?'

'Just think,' Cam said with a smirk, pocketing a vial of groan salve. 'When Spout figures out how to fly, we won't need tunnels. We can just fly Jadans to Langria. We'll call it the Coldfly.'

I gave him a warm smile. 'The Coldfly.'

Shilah gave a light snort, reaching for the latch on the glass face.

Just then Split burst in, boiling water sloshing over the rim of his bucket. 'Hands off that clock, girl!'

Shilah didn't startle, but she slowly took her hand away and folded her arms across her chest. 'My name's Shilah. Not girl.'

Split's face went blank as he turned away. 'Fine. Whatever. I don't want you to leave your scent on the glass.' He looked uncomfortable. 'Because of the hounds.'

Shilah bared her teeth, giving a low growl.

I knew she was joking, but Split looked poised to pick up the crossbow.

'Split,' I said. 'I'll just take the whole bucket of water if you don't mind.'

Split looked to Cam, who was still lingering by the healing box, the Pedlar's eyes narrowing. 'You going to pay me back for all this Cold I'm wasting on your Jadans?'

'You can't waste Cold on Jadans,' Cam said with a scowl, crossing his arms over his blouse. 'And by the way, you should prepare yourself for quite the opposite.'

Split shook his head with disdain, even the stubble on his cheeks looked a bit darker. 'You get bit by a Sobek too, boy? Crawled in your ear and nibbled on your brain?'

I gestured for the bucket.

The Pedlar grumbled, thrusting it over. The steaming water sloshed onto my foot, but since the underground water always ran cooler than in the boiling rivers, it didn't raise blisters.

'Close your eyes,' Split demanded. 'All of you.'

'Sorry?' Cam asked. 'I thought that was just Shilah who wasn't allowed to look at you during the March.'

Split was redder than any alder paint now. 'I don't want you to know where my Cold is hidden, boy! In case the Vicaress catches you and tortures you. Damn the damned Khat, he doesn't need my Cold. A man should always die with a few secrets.'

'Like I said, I don't need Cold,' I said, letting the anticipation build. 'I have what I need.'

Split sighed, rubbing his temples. 'A mad flock. And I thought two boys was going to be obstacle enough.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Cam asked.

Split huffed, wiping away a little leftover grey ash from under his nose. 'You obviously don't know much about the Coldmarch, *Tavor*.'

'Never mind that.' I asked the Pedlar as seriously as I could, 'What do you *believe*?'

Split's beady eyes narrowed even further. 'In regards to?'

'Everything,' I said simply.

'A mad flock,' Split muttered again, rubbing the sides of his head.

'We're the best flock you've ever had,' Cam said, still indignant.

Shilah tapped at the Khatclock glass once more.

'Don't *do* that!' Split chided.

Shilah turned around with a glare. There was a plan in her eyes.

I waved my friends off, needing them to be still. This was going to be the first time a stranger witnessed what my machine

could do.

‘What do you believe?’ I asked Split softly again, holding my palm over the bucket, the Abb ready to fall in the water. I didn’t relish the idea of wasting a full golden bead, but the Pedlar’s trust and obedience was equally as important.

‘About the World Cried?’ I continued. ‘About the Khatdom? About the Jadans? You don’t call us slaves, not like most High Nobles. What do you *believe*?’

Split paused, gathering a huge breath in his ruddy face. Everything inside the shack went quiet enough that I could hear Picka braying gently outside in the stable, knocking her hooves against the trough.

‘You really want to know?’ Split asked quietly.

I nodded.

The pause was so heavy that I thought the floor might crack. When he finally looked at me, it was with something emptier than anger. His eyes stirred in the realms of loss, which was all too familiar.

I wanted to dig my fingers back into my wrist, but I had to keep the Abb steady.

‘I believe that we’re alone,’ Split said quietly, his cheeks trembling. ‘That no one is watching. I believe that everyone consumes this World Crier crap all the time, and they drop down on their knees to get their doses, and they say “give me more, please, let me have the truth”. But you know why everything around us, the whole damned world, is all still sand and shit? You

know why when people say *Great Drought* I say my *great pale ass*? There was no ‘chosen’, no ‘unworthy’. It’s all Sun-damned coincidence. There’s no such thing as the World Crier, or if there was, then he died long ago and left us on our own. You know what I believe?’ He paused, looking into the steaming waters in the bucket. ‘I believe we’re alone as can be.’

I let the gold bead fall.

The bucket creaked and screamed at the rapid change from water to Ice, the seams splitting loose and cracking in half. The scorching water completely changed in the blink of an eye, pushing hard enough to break the metal entirely apart. This wasn’t just a few Drafts in the bottom of a barrel, or a Shiver in the wind. This was a complete and utter shift in reality. This was snuffing out the Sun. This was taking the Vicaress’s fiery blade and turning it around so *she* could be Cleansed.

This was sanctuary.

The solid block of Ice was both shield and weapon. I had a feeling I could stick it in the heart of Paphos and it would never yield, even after being gnawed on by the Sun, hacked at by taskmasters, stabbed by the Vicaress, and prayed away by the Priests.

Split’s face went slack, his eyes processing the impossible. His fingers had stopped scratching at his leg, and were now sweeping through the air in front of his face, as if he were trying to swat away the devastation of a mirage.

I picked up a piece of the metal scrap that had exploded from

the bucket, which still lingered with the touch of Ice, and pressed the flat of it against my injured wrist. The pain and throbbing ceased immediately against the impossible Cold.

‘*Meshua*,’ Split whispered, and then stumbled backwards, smacking into his counter, his body jerking stiff. ‘*Meshua*.’

I gave up the scrap, the residual Cold quickly becoming too much. A gorgeous mist drifted from the top of the Ice, white and lovely. The Inventor in me wanted to grab an empty bottle from the healing box and see if I could bottle the stuff, thinking it might be useful in its own right.

Split’s face had gone so pale I could almost see the bones underneath. His eyes were flashing with something that looked unsettlingly like worry. ‘Damn it to dust and rot. After all these Sun-damned years.’ His expression grew murderous and sorrowful at the same time, his hands clenching into fists so tight I thought his knuckles might dissolve to powder. ‘It can’t be *Meshua*.’ He clenched his teeth and his face trembled, as if he were about to hiss. His breathing quickly grew stunted, his breath shallow and infrequent. His hand went over his chest, pain registering in his face.

I hoped the lingering Droughtweed wasn’t reacting with the shock in some unforeseen way. Abb had taught me some rudimentary healing techniques, but nothing extensive, and I wouldn’t know how to deal with a failing heart.

‘It’s not possible,’ the Pedlar said between his teeth. ‘Can’t be real. Not now. Not after all this time.’

‘Split,’ I said, staying behind the Ice. ‘It’s okay. It’s safe.’

‘Man or woman?’ he said, pallid face somehow seething red.

‘Sorry?’ I asked carefully.

‘Is Meshua a man or a woman, you little brat?’ he barked, far removed from any semblance of patience. His eyes kept flicking to the Droughtweed pit in the floor. ‘You must know, since they gave you the Ice.’

Mist from the Ice rode up the front of my shirt and it took everything in me not to swoon from the spectacular sensation. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

Split sucked in a breath, his clenched hand rubbing the spot over his heart, as if he were attempting to loosen his lungs up for air. His movements were frantic, and the muscles in his shoulders strained.

Shilah walked over to Split and reached out to put a hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s okay. We all felt the same way the first time—’

He swatted her away, not meeting her eyes. ‘Don’t *touch* me. Back up, girl!’

‘Whoa,’ Cam said, holding up his hands. ‘Take it easy, Pedlar. She’s only trying to help.’

‘Dammit! *Meshua!* Man’ – Split’s breath had constricted to a wheezing now – ‘or woman?’

‘What is *Me-sh-ua?*’ I asked, enunciating each syllable. I recognized it from the sacred words Abb had sung to me, but he had never revealed what the prayer actually meant.

Split pointed at the Ice, his finger shaking. ‘The Crier’s child.

Meshua. The one who made that.’

I paused, not following. ‘I made that.’

‘Yeah, Spout made that,’ Cam affirmed, snapping his fingers at Split. ‘Weren’t you watching?’

Shilah crossed her arms over her chest and gave Cam a dark look.

Split kept rubbing his heart, his knuckles frantic now.

‘Yes, I know that, Tavor moron,’ Split chided. ‘But the Jadan who shed that golden tear. The Crier’s child. *Meshua*. Simple question. Man. Or woman? The Book of the March isn’t clear.’

Cam stepped closer, holding his palms up innocently. ‘I think you’re mistaken, my friend.’

Split grabbed his crossbow from the ground, and all three of us stiffened. Before Shilah could extract her knife, an arrow was once again threatening my face. Split’s hands were shaking so badly I had no idea if the arrow would end up in my eye or chin, but he kept looking at the Droughtweed pit, so I knew his aim would not be true.

‘Are you with the Vicaress?’ Split seethed. ‘Or did you steal the golden tear?’

Cam went to step in front of me, but I kept him at an arm’s distance. As long as the arrow wasn’t pointed at my friends, I felt perfectly calm.

‘I didn’t steal anything,’ I said. ‘I found the secret that’s going to set us all free. *All* of us. Jadians and Nobles alike.’

‘You *found* it?’ Split asked, aghast.

I nodded, looking at Shilah. ‘With help, of course.’

‘Did they—’ Split nearly choked on the words. ‘Was it— Did they put it in the ground?’

I wasn’t shocked to hear the suggestion about ‘putting it in the ground’, but I was most certainly intrigued. There had always been Old Man Gum’s endless prattles about ‘they put it in the ground’ when I was young and living in the barracks. And then the Crier had said something similar in my vision when I’d been put under the Thoth’s wool hat. Leroi had only agreed to let me stay in the tinkershop after hearing the phrase. It must mean something. I pointed to the Coldmaker bag, to the chiselled bronze Eye peeking out from the canvas. ‘No. It was put in my mind. And my heart. And my hands.’

Split’s face broke, and he turned the crossbow around, holding the tip of the arrow against his own throat. The metal pressed into the soft flesh and scratched against grey stubble. The Pedlar’s hands were no longer shaking, which somehow seemed worse.

No one moved.

‘I was loyal,’ Split sobbed, a tear racing down his cheek. ‘I risked everything, and this is how I get repaid! I believed for so long! And the Crier takes everything from me. Then ten years later sends salvation like it’s nothing! Like it’s Sun-damned NOTHING! Meshua was all supposed to be a lie, I could handle a lie, because if it’s real ...’ His thumb crept closer to the arrow release. ‘If Meshua is actually here. If you are here with the golden tears, standing in the same place where ...’

My jaw had gone slack, completely at a loss for what to do. Mist from the block of Ice swirled upwards, curling around Split's fingers, which I prayed wouldn't flinch. If the Pedlar pulled the trigger, the Coldmarch was over.

Shilah raced to the Pedlar without fear, inching her hand in between the arrow and his throat. It wouldn't stop the weapon if Split chose to squeeze, but her confidence was as good as a steel barrier.

'You're part of this,' Shilah said softly, curling her palm around the tip of the arrow, almost enough to make a fist. 'We need you, Split.'

Split gulped as his eyes slipped sideways and fell again on the Droughtweed pit.

'Tell Meshua to go burn forever,' Split exhaled, his thumb shaking so badly it was now tapping the release. 'Didn't save anyone.'

Shilah slowly removed Split's hand from the trigger. 'You can save *us*. Help bring the machine to Langria. Be a part of this.'

The Pedlar's face cycled through a dozen emotions, and finally he let out a long sigh and dropped to his knees, the crossbow skittering across the floor. Shilah was quick to pick the weapon up and take the arrow off the shaft, giving me a calm nod, almost as if she did this sort of thing every day. The knife never even left her thigh.

Saving my admiration for later, I reached over the Ice and put a hand on the Pedlar's shoulder, my whole arm tingling.

‘She’s right,’ I said. ‘We need you, Split.’

‘Show mercy, and tell me it’s a trick,’ Split said, his eyes closed tightly, refusing to look at the Ice. ‘Is it expected that I forgive everything? Just like that?’

‘It’s real,’ I said. ‘And I’ll tell you everything you want to know.’

‘You have the miracle,’ Split said, face still scrunched tightly. ‘The golden tears of the World Crier’s child. And you don’t know Meshua.’

‘I don’t know. But we need to keep the Coldmaker safe. Now can you get us to Langria before the hounds track us down?’

Split opened his eyes and pressed his palms on the ground as flat as he could, the mist that had settled against the floor slipping through his fingers. Then he looked up at me, boring into my eyes. Anger had slipped away, and of all the things plaguing his face, regret now ringed his eyes the most.

‘Don’t you understand?’ he asked, pointing a finger at the block of Ice. ‘This is the miracle; *this* is Langria. And it’s not just hounds that they’re going to send.’



Chapter Seven

Split's hands moved like heat lightning as he scooped out mounds of ash, burned leaves, and slag from the small pit in the floor. Tossing the residue aside, he wiped his hands on his already ruined shirt, leaving long black smudges. The air in the shack quickly became dusty and thick from the flurry of upended Droughtweed remains, making me hold my breath so I didn't cough or inhale too much. Once the plant touched fire, the smell turned from earthy to sickly sweet. The tang caught in the back of my throat and reminded me of things of which I didn't want to be reminded.

I looked at the Ice, over which Split had reverently draped his thin sleeping blanket, making sure that it wasn't sullied by his senseless digging.

Cam leaned in and whispered in my ear. 'I don't think this is the time for him to huff Droughtweed and go on some vision quest, Spout.'

'I'm not sure that's what's happening,' I said. 'You add leaves to make the slag more potent, you don't wipe it clean.'

'You do know your stuff. Can you say something to him?' Cam asked. 'I don't think he likes me very much.'

I nodded, making my tone as gentle as possible. Split's reactions were interesting to behold, making me wonder if I should have kept the Coldmaker secret.

‘Split,’ I said gently. ‘Perhaps it’s not the best time for that. We should be moving, and it’s best we take our wits along.’

Split had already removed most of the old deposit, and he grabbed a new strip of boilweed, wiping the pit clean. The cleaning didn’t make much sense, knowing from my weeks beholden to the Roof Warden that compounding the grey residue only made the visions and high stronger. He was ruining his supply.

‘Meshua and Ice,’ Split said to himself, his coughs coming out grey. ‘Wits don’t exist any more. So I have to get Baba Levante. I have to get Baba Levante. I made a promise that I would.’

‘Split,’ I said again, hoping the sound of his name might snap him back to reality. ‘We have to get moving.’

‘Absolutely,’ Split said, practically shining the pit now. ‘But first we have to go under.’

Shilah had returned to her place near the Khatclock, scrutinizing the edges for signs of a secret passageway the device might be hiding.

‘Okay,’ Split said, stopping and sitting back on his thin ankles, looking over the pile of ash and slag next to the pit. ‘It’s ready.’

I swallowed, taking a step back. ‘I don’t do that any more.’

I thought back to Old Man Gum from my childhood, curious about what event had sent him over the edge of sanity. We had to respect him, since he was the oldest and most weathered in the barracks, but no one ever took his babbling seriously. Now I had to know, who put *what* in the ground? Had the crazy loon from

my past, with his toothless mouth and wild eyes, known about this Meshua as well?

‘Girl,’ Split said gently, still staring into the pit. ‘Shaylah. You can do it now. Open the clock and give it a turn.’

‘Shilah,’ she corrected firmly.

‘Fine,’ Split said, waving a hand. ‘Just don’t look at me.’

Shilah lifted the glass off the face of the machine. She didn’t seem nearly as lost as Cam and I in all of this. She spun the hands one full rotation in the same way Mama Jana had, and the large Eye clicked open, revealing gears behind. But instead of causing the whole creation to swing forwards, the Khatclock stayed where it was.

The floor opened up.

With an angry creak, the bottom of the Droughtweed pit fell to the side, revealing a tight passageway wide enough only for one person. Thin stairs dropped down into the darkness at an alarming angle, steep and slick.

Split coughed at the wave of dust stirred up by the floor’s disappearance, and gave a satisfied nod, his body visibly loosening. ‘Okay, let’s be quick. They’re going to be coming for us.’

Cam covered his mouth and spoke between fingers. ‘Shivers and Frosts, Spout. What is he—’

Split turned to Cam, his eyes still red and raw. ‘You don’t get to touch anything down here.’

Cam turned up his palms, taken aback. ‘Why are you singling

me out?’

Split scoffed, turning back around and threading himself through the hole. ‘*Tavors.*’

Once the Pedlar had disappeared into the secret chamber, a tiny light blossomed within, casting flickering shadows back up the stairs. Shilah came over and gave the back of my neck a squeeze, her fingers lingering on my tattooed numbers. ‘He’s right. About what we made.’

‘Hmm?’ I asked.

She pointed to the Ice, and then, without another word, followed the Pedlar into the hidden space. Her upright posture was perfect for slipping down the steep stairs, and the grey dust swirled and eddied in the wake of her swift descent.

A sudden gasp returned back up, but it sounded more of awe than danger.

I clapped Cam on the shoulder, finally wanting to smile at the adventure in it all. I should have been dead a dozen times over – we all should have – but my father would have been proud to watch me attempt this Coldmarch. There was no time for me to grieve, so I knew the second best thing was to do his memory proud. Abb had had a great sense of humour, but an even greater sense of story.

‘Better keep those hands to yourself, *Tavor,*’ I whispered with a smirk, hovering over the open pit listening to the sounds of muffled conversation.

Cam’s face fell. ‘I wasn’t going to touch anything.’

‘I was joking,’ I said as quickly as I could.

‘Oh.’ Cam gave me a sullen look. ‘You seemed serious.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that,’ I said. ‘I was just kidding.’

Cam waved it away. ‘No, I know that. It was funny.’

I put a hand on his shoulder. ‘You’re family. I don’t lump you with the rest of— I just—’

Cam’s smile grew wider, but I could see his true expression behind his eyes, as if I’d punched him in the gut, or taken a taskmaster’s whip and added to the scars on his back.

‘It’s okay,’ Cam said.

‘No, we—’ I tried, my stomach sinking. ‘You’re not—’

‘It’s okay, Mic— Spout,’ Cam said with a nod, finding his eyes on the hole instead of my face. ‘Let’s go see what this crazy Pedlar is hiding.’

I pressed my teeth together, promising myself I’d make it up to Cam later. Before going into the chamber I slung the Coldmaker bag over my shoulder, wincing as a metal edge of the machine caught my injured wrist.

‘You can leave it up here,’ Cam said in a gentle manner. ‘I don’t think anyone is going to take it.’

‘I know,’ I said, but couldn’t bear the thought of leaving the machine behind. ‘But just in case.’

Then I proceeded down the stairs, holding the bag close and trying not to slip. Since I only had one good grabbing hand to begin with, I had to keep most of my body pressed sideways for balance, the lips of the stairs scraping into my ribs, worsened by

the weight of the machine.

But once I settled at the bottom, I was unable to withhold my own gasp.

The place was a museum.

Or a tomb.

Or a vision.

Or the finest shop, selling equal parts treasure and equal parts dust.

I couldn't tell.

'What is this place?' I asked, clutching my machine close.

This was completely unlike the other secret chamber we'd discovered since starting the March. Even though we'd found spaces with little shrines and gifts from past flocks, mostly those rooms had consisted of crude drawings on clay walls.

This third chamber made the first seem practically empty.

Split's chamber was the size of a small Cry Temple, the ceiling high enough that even Slab Hagan – the tallest Jadan from my barracks – wouldn't have been able to touch the top without a stool. Two dark corridors snaked away near the back of the room, dimly lit by a fresh candle flickering on a centre table. Overstocked shelves rose up from every available part of the stone floor, bursting at the seams with artefacts and maps and tapestries and treasures that screamed at us from every corner of the room, dizzying in their array and sense of age. Statues. Beaded clothing. Pottery. Jewellery. Scrolls. Everything down here had a tinge of neglect, but even under the shawls of dust,

the items glowed with personality and life.

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