

Prologue

I admit, I seem younger than my fifteen years. Narrow as the wind and still hoping to surpass five feet in height. Usually disheveled and dirty as if I had just tumbled right out of the woods. But the thing is, I have almost always just tumbled right out of the woods. The garb I wear today is the finest I've ever worn. It hangs on my frame as it would hang from hooks on a wall.

I tried to prepare myself mentally for the violence I seemed to be destined to face. My life, until recently, had been filled with love and kindness. My family of smiths and scholars would not know what to make of all this. They would not at all understand what I had made of myself. Until a few weeks past, I could have counted my sparring partners on one finger and that same finger also counted the man who had trained me to fight.

What had I learned from the past few exhausting weeks? Nothing more than "survive at all cost."

To the north, a row of Kingsguard held back the surging crowd of spectators that seemed to have somehow grown, despite the closed doors. The bravest few clung to the tall columns or risked an endless fall by hanging out the windows, all to get a good view of the pending spectacle. To the east and west, only a few narrow columns delineated the vast spaces that opened onto nothing but the sky. To the south was the long dais, upon which was everyone who had set my fate today.

In this crowded room, only the astrologer Gaelen stood near the dark, oval gate at the far side of the dais. He could not rest his gaze on me without bursting into laughter. He suppressed his mirth only long enough lift his arms in a signal of readiness.

I turned to face my opponent's broad chest. He towered head and shoulders above me, ten times the muscle I had on a frame easily twice as wide. I felt like a twig facing down a tree. I craned my neck to look up at his face, a face that would always cause my heart to pound. The deep scar that began at his hairline and cut diagonally all the way to his chin gave his already fierce expression a savagery that his pale grey eyes did not remotely assuage. Indeed those eyes glared at me with a hatred I could not remotely fathom.

I looked to my sister Junia. She was why I must survive. I would protect her at all costs. Seeing her face helped me to clear my mind, and fill it with love. I filled my heart with a love that encompassed the world and everyone I have ever known, including all the people in this room. I felt the anger pouring off my opponent's in sharp rays. "Just try and kill me." I thought with sudden and unreasonable glee. "Your hatred has nothing on my love."

With a fresh peal of laughter, Gaelen struck the hook of his weapon down onto the stones with a resounding crack.

I sprang forward. I would defeat this man or die. As I swung my weapon, my beloved pikali, I could not help but think, "How had my stars led me here?"

Truth be told, every path I had chosen had led me to that encounter. And most of them wound through the Delphinian Woods.

We lived at the top of the ridge at the very edge of what we called The Delphinian Woods. In school they taught that across the border in Coronado, they called it by another name, but I don't remember it. It extended for countless miles through Ilia and far into Coronado. Delphin sat at the far northern edge of the woods, which were a place of endless wonder to me.

I had been poking about in the forge for years before my Da, Fermin, allowed me to walk the forest paths to hunt down pika.

The pika plant was valuable, but the forest as a whole was invaluable, for being the only known place where the pika grew wild. Nomads, foresters and farmers who stumbled across the wild plants yanked them from the forest floor, and transplanted them in fields. But outside the forest, they soon withered and died. No harvest was ever made from a transplanted pika.

Since nobody ever managed to cultivate the pika, foraging in the wild was eventually left to my family and a very few others. It was no accident that the informal compound of our home and the forge sat at the very edge of the forest. We had been slipping into the forest to hunt pika as long as anyone kept records, and probably much longer.

I was thirteen when my Da finally allowed my cousin Arol and me to come with him. "I want you to promise me that you'll listen carefully, and do everything I say. The woods are dangerous: hidden bogs, twisting vines that grab at your ankles, vicious creatures. Poisonous plants. Most grown men fear it."

"And you will take us tomorrow?" I asked.

"You promise?" Arol demanded.

"You two!" he shouted. "There's something wrong with you."

It was late spring, and Arol and I were already sleeping on the rooftop balcony on clear nights. The slightest hint of light over the trees usually woke me and by five-thirty, I was prodding him awake. We covered out pallets, lit our lantern and crawled through the low door and descended to the main room. By the time I was down, Arol was pulling clothes out of the cupboard. Rough leggings for both of us, short sleeve shirts, and full caps to tidy our hair away. We each took an oiled canvas backpack and carefully wrapped some bread and boiled eggs. We added skins of water. We were ready.

I knocked at Da's door.

"THE MOTHER STAR IS NOT EVEN UP YET!"

Soon, Da came out dressed much the same as us, but he had to have tea, and breakfast, and that woke my uncle Davlis, who then wanted breakfast too. By the time we were getting our boots on, it was bright outside.

Arol stood beside my Da and complained unabashed. "We need a full day if we are going to find any pika, let's go!"

Without putting down his mug of tea, Da wrapped his other arm around Arol's head and clamped his large hand over his mouth. Arol's eyes bulged.

He peered into our packs, mine with water sacks, Arol's with the bundle of food.

"This will make a nice picnic for a quick hike. We'll be back in time to do a full day's work in the forge."

It was ages before Da was finally pleased and we were ready to leave. We added much more food to the backpacks, then a small folding saw, an axe, several woven bags, one of them full of tiny metal clips, a couple of complicated box traps, and a folded belt of small tools.

Junia and my cousin Sess, who had slept undisturbed through all the ruckus we made, were finally up. Junia hugged me a quiet goodbye.

"Hi Ho," said Da, and we followed him out the door. In less than a minute we were at the edge of the forest. We had never been allowed past this point before now.

Da paused. Arol and I were stepping from side to side in our excitement. "You stay right behind me, unless I say otherwise. You be quiet, so we can hear. And you listen to every word I say." Arol nodded.

"I promise. I'll live these next hours of my life the best I can," I said.

They both stared at me. I did not know where the words came from, but they felt right.

"Me too?" said Arol.

Da nodded and waved his arms melodramatically. "Come into the Delphinian Woods with me, we search for the pika." As if we needed to be more stirred up.

He stepped into the path. I expected shadows to cover him instantly, sticks to crack ominously, but it was really a very nice path at first, with broad swaths of lights filtering through the trees. I followed him, Arol right behind me. I looked back and grinned. He too was already smiling ear to ear. We had been waiting for this our whole lives. Considering all the misbehavior and freedom we children in town enjoyed, not one of us ever disobeyed the injunction to stay out of the forest. At least once a year, some starving, half-crazed lostling would stagger from the woods, claiming to have been wandering for weeks, and having been chased by terrifying, winged and fanged creatures. My Da reasoned that they had probably eaten mushrooms they shouldn't have touched, and were lucky to be alive at all.

"Although there is one winged lizard with teeth that rival a wolf," he admitted.

He pointed our way forward. "This main track cuts south-east for miles, then curves further south. Nobody bothers to maintain it, but it's cut through rock, so it's pretty easy to clear. Secondary paths branch out from it, then smaller and smaller ones from those. Until you know the forest, you stay on the paths where you can at least fit two abreast, or in sight of them, if you wander into the brush. Always look back every couple feet to make sure you can see the path. When you can't; you turn yourself back home."

He was right, within fifty feet of the forest edge, our nice broad path had become a narrow, dark trail. Vines trailed around our feet and over our heads. Da stopped to tie a piece of string around one, as high as he could reach.

The trees to either side of it were dense and filled with fallen brush. Animal sounds surrounded us. Da paused on the path and pointed out where the sounds came from. He pointed out tiny birds and huge insects. There was a loudly clicking beetle that gleamed like polished copper and was the size of my hand. He held a twig out to it, and the huge, red pincers on its head crushed the twig into splinters.

“They can cut your finger off if you are not careful.” He stroked the back of the shiny wings with his free hand and the beetle released the twig. “But you can distract them with a little affection.”

He showed us how to see the hidden forks. We wandered down path after path, some dark and sheltered, and some brightly lit as the forest thinned out to let trails of light stream through the leafy canopy. Arol and I were jumpy, imagining foul beasts and madmen behind every second tree.

Da pointed out different trees, and asked us their names. We got maybe one in ten, but he would always wait for us to guess before he supplied the name. Most I had never seen, but of those few I had, I now wished I had paid more attention to them as he demanded to know their names, their times to blossom.

“Spring?” was our guess each time.

He reeled off names and seasons, a confusion of baffling terms. My father had been wandering through these woods for thirty years and more. After thirty minutes, I realized how little I might ever understand, and how infinite and unknowable our world is. Being utterly humbled drove the nervousness out of my head. The forest ceased to frighten or excite me. It enthralled me.

There was a flapping of wings.

“HRAGH!” yelled Da, and a black and yellow bird that had been flying at my head, its claws extended, turned mid-air and disappeared amongst the branches.

“Goldcrow,” he said. “They are reckless but stupid and any noise scares them off. Problem is if they manage to latch on with their claws, their beaks are sharp as knives and they can peck the side of your head apart in minutes.

He stopped at a willow and peeled the bark back, showing the pith underneath, which he said we could eat if we were ever needful. We each took a nibble. It tasted awful.

“Someday you may recall this, and that one day it might keep you alive. Look at the branching pattern on this willow; this one has tasty bark. If you see a pattern that alternates side to side, avoid it, it is far too bitter.”

We turned back at that point and came to a complex fork we had passed on our way in. There were five different paths to choose from and they all appeared the same. Da stopped and watched us expectantly.

I pointed up the path just to our left. “That way?” I said.

“If you chose that path, you would come out of the forest about ten miles south of home.” He looked pointedly at me. “In about three days.”

“This way.” He pointed to a tiny twig stuck in the ground, bent so it pointed back down a path. “I left a marker for us.”

Over a few hours he taught us how to notch trees, twine branches, bend twigs, bundle weeds or grasses with a reed, ram long pointed branches into the ground and make rock piles to mark our turnings. Da showed us how he and Davlis had made lop-sticks on all the paths that led back home; they always used pine or fir trees, with one level of branches cut short all around. I couldn't reach as high as the cut branches, but I could see them on tiptoe. He also carried little forked branches in his pockets, which he placed carefully in branches, or on the ground as we walked. As we backtracked, he picked them up and handed us a few each.

“Always point them back toward your path home.”

Home, my stomach growled in response. Strange, but it felt both as if we had been in the forest for mere moments and simultaneously that we had been here for days. But it was just now lunchtime. Da led us off the path a few feet, stopping first for Arol and me to excessively mark our trail. We sat for lunch in a small clearing. The ground was soft and dry and we were ravenous. We made short work of all the supplies Da had wisely brought along.

“Willow bark would even be tasty right now,” I said.

Arol pulled out a twig from underneath him. “I would eat this, if I could.”

Da reached behind him and pulled a random pile of weeds and grasses. He held up the little handful in his palm and started sorting through them.

“This is cow-weed, you could eat it if you had to, but it can give you a stomach-ache. This big one is rhybar, not much taste, and tiny amounts are used to ease pain, but enough will make you shake violently until you die. This leafy one is called Taraxacum in Roma; when it is young and soft, it is delicious.” He handed us each a leaf, and we lay on our backs and chewed it pleurably, the warmth of the mother star shone red through my eyelids.

Da nudged me awake what seemed like seconds later. He sat on a stump behind me, held a finger to his lips and directed his eyes to the edge of the clearing. Not ten feet away, a family of ermine was scampering past us, the babies beginning to mottle from white to brown.

Beyond them, in the trees, stood a man.

He was taller even than Davlis, but slender, with salt and pepper hair that hung unbound just to his shoulders. His skin was pale and he was dressed in a manner I had never seen. He wore a deeply dyed burgundy vest embroidered at all the edges with vivid silver and gold designs; it was cut to his mid-thigh and was circled by a wide metal belt, which gleamed in the dim light, the enormous buckle like a crest. His leggings and shirt were almost white, and he had no pack, he was carrying nothing on him at all. His boots appeared to be dark

leather right up to the knees, laced all around, with an artful fold that fell back a few inches from the top. My first thought upon seeing him was that I wanted a pair of those boots. The next was surprise that he was there.

“Who is he?” I whispered, turning my head to him.

Da was waking Arol and glanced back at me confusion. “They’re ermine, Olly.”

I looked back to the woods, but the man was gone. I quickly looked from side to side. Had I dreamt him? Could I have dreamt of boots I had never seen?

“Da, would you ever make a whole pair of boots out of leather?”

Da laughed. “Aye. If I was rich, I certainly would.” He looked down at me with mirth in his eyes, as I leaned on my elbows and hung my head behind me to stare at him. I suddenly felt ridiculous. I got up abruptly, walked to where the ermine had passed, and looked into the forest where the man had been standing. The trees were not overly thick, and I could see the forest floor, carpeted with grasses and tiny flowering plants. Nothing seemed crushed to me, but what did I know of tracking? I felt too foolish to ask Da to look.

After our lunch and nap, we finally stilled our chatter and saw far more wildlife; tiny deer, marmots, and, at a distance, a great grey bear on its own.

“She’s far enough away; there’s no worry,” he said. “The real predators come out at night. You can see lynx and cougars, coyotes, and even razors, although most of the razors have disappeared into the southern woods.” The bear glanced toward us and then stood up on its hind legs. “She’s just posturing, see, sniffing the air to dismiss us.” The bear dropped to all fours and started lumbering forward and suddenly the distance between us didn’t seem so large. The grey pelt of the bear heaved into the air and shook as she ran, great clods of grass and dirt flying behind her. I stood where I was, shaking and gasping as Da dropped to his knees and began to scramble frantically through his bag.

2

Da tossed things from his bag into the air to land where they would until he triumphantly hefted his horn, a long spiraling curve of shell and silver. He raised the horn to his lips. I saw Arol cover his ears and I had the sense to do the same. The sound pierced the whole world. The bear reared up on her enormous feet, her chest floating high into the air above our heads. She was so close I could smell her horrid breath. She twisted, her forepaws crashed down onto the forest floor and she lumbered hurriedly away, shaking her massive head from side to side as if to dislodge the sound. From all around us, mice, lizards, and some enormous, bright, red squirrels erupted from the underbrush and scattered away in all directions. Birds took to the air in a wonderful flurry of flapping wings. Then, there was suddenly silence.

“A horn is handy to have, but only for emergencies. Why disturb the woods without need?” said Da.

The silence was so deep that Da and I both heard the soft sound and turned just in time to watch the sloth swing down from a branch and wrap his long forearms around Arol. We all froze in place until the sloth began affectionately licking Arol’s bare belly. Da carefully pulled the long clawed hands away from Arol and

yanked him out of the way. The sloth swung comically back and forth from its back legs. He smiled his upside down grin at us and we both laughed.

“You won’t laugh if you had gotten cut by those long claws! Their cuts fester and they don’t know their own strength,” Da said. There was some fuzzy algae hanging from the coat of the sloth. “Pull some of that off and lay it over any cut and it will heal.”

Da seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, and possibly the sides. He saw everything. He pointed out fifty ways for us to die and one hundred antidotes and remedies. He even pointed out a nest of Brighteyes. The color-changing birds could shut their inner translucent eyelids and blend almost invisibly into their surroundings. They were now mottled brown and green like the mossy log in which they had nested. But as we gathered around them, they peeped and flapped their wings at us, and the one nearest to Da began to shift to the light grey of his leggings. Then the bird opened its crystalline, aqua eyes, and why they were named so was clear. It was as if they were lit from within.

“We can sell them to the council or the temple,” said Da. “If they can be trained young enough, they make excellent messenger birds. Even their feet are blue against a clear sky, and I swear they have the shimmering glint of the stars when they fly overhead at night.”

Arol and I did not have the heart to disturb the bird’s nest, but when Da told us how much we would get for the birds and the eggs, we changed our minds and helped him to build a simple cage of twigs into which we moved the whole nest.

While Da was finishing the cage, another of the big, vividly red squirrels came out of the brush. I pulled some dry bread from my pocket and held it out to see if he was friendly. He started hopping toward my hand. I heard a rustle and suddenly I was flying into the air, yanked up by Da.

“What? You almost pulled my arm out!” I yelled.

“Never go near the sqyells, Olly!”

“It was just a big squirrel, Da!” I laughed.

Da picked up a rock, and threw it at the animal. Its lips pulled back to hiss and display two horrible rows of black, dagger-like teeth with fangs at the front over a half-inch long.

“Stars!” I gasped and jumped behind Da. How did those teeth fit into that little head?

“This one is pretty brave, they usually only approach humans in packs, but a pack of sqyells will always attack and their bite is terrible. Remember the bite on your Grandda’s arm?”

I had a vague memory of Arol sticking his fingers into a big, ragged hole in somebody’s forearm.

“I remember that,” Arol said shakily, and we watched the little monster back away into the bushes, hissing at us the whole way.

“I swear on the Hunter that they are somehow the spawn of the Razors. That same red fur,” Da said, shuddering. “And when they can’t find anything else to kill, they eat each other. Worse yet, they are as cute as

kittens. You're far from the first to be taken in. Most of the danger in these woods is disguised by the most beauty."

We wandered the beauty of the woods all day, Da asking us occasionally to name what we saw and touched. Our boots were good oiled canvas, stitched to thick, leather soles, but trouble-thorns still attached to our laces, our leggings.

The trouble-plant was the bane of farmers in the foothills. It had clusters of nasty burrs made of tiny curved thorns, which were tough, although never as tough as pika barbs. I knew from experience that they could tear apart the toughest clothes.

Da pulled them off his boots as he silently crept through the brush. He chastised us for every twig we snapped as we staggered behind him. As the day wore on, our tempers shortened and it finally occurred to me that we hadn't even really been looking for pika, which was the whole reason we had come into the forest. I asked why.

"I have been looking. Everything I am showing you all helps in looking for pika. It seldom grows on the path. Most often we will have to hike far into the woods to find it, and it is most always a matter of luck. Once you find it, you have to get it back home, and before you will ever go looking on your own, you need to know your way back and how to fend off anything in your way."

"Will we find any today?" Arol asked.

As luck would have it, we did. We turned for home in the late afternoon. With all our backtracking, we had not wandered all that far from the edge of the forest. Da stopped on the path and sniffed. He turned and winked at us.

"This way, pika could be close."

Not fifteen feet from the path, we found one.

The pika was five feet high, and covered in long, broad, furry leaves. The leaves were butter soft to the touch, but strong and pliable; fresh pika leaves could be felted into perfectly fitted caps, boots, and clothes. There were crofters in town, who dyed and wove them into cloth: softer than wool, and much stronger.

This plant had three fruits; lovely and fresh, mottled pink and grey, each the size of a full watermelon. Arol reached for one and Da caught his hand just inches from the fruit. He pointed carefully and there, all but invisible, was a massive spider the size of his hand. It was mottled pink and grey, just like the fruit.

"Pika spider. Every plant has one. Insects and animals love pika just like you two. The spiders don't eat it, but they dwell on the plants and gorge on everything that passes by. They save the fruit for us."

Da took out the complicated box traps. Each was about eight inches long, four inches wide with a couple hooks on the side. He dropped the hooks over one of the leaf stems and we stood back. The spider wiggled his legs and appeared to be smelling the air with his whole body. He scurried horribly across the fruit and up the stem and dropped neatly into the door at the top of the trap.

"Stuffed full of rotten fish. They love it." Da pulled the trap off the plant and laid it on the ground.

Finally Da wrapped his hands around a pika fruit.

“They’re perfectly ripe.” He took out his belt-knife and deftly cut the stem, then took a woven bag out of his backpack and placed the large fruit inside. He wrapped his hands around another. “When they are ripe, you can often twist them off the stem.”

He showed us how to twist, pulling away from the stem so that it broke away clean, leaving a small indent in the fruit. He pulled out a separate bag for it and another one for the last fruit.

“You have both seen the ones we have in the root cellar now, the skin is brown and rough, with the scaly pattern on it. That was fruit picked when not yet ripened. It lasts a lot longer in our cold room, and we dry it for lean times, but it will never taste like these lovelies will.” He handed me the knife. I shook my head and pulled my own out of my belt; it was very small, but I could well recall when it had seemed huge in my hand. Plus, it was mine. Davlis had made it just for me.

He guided my blade to the stem of the last fruit. “Support it with your other hand so that it doesn’t fall when it is cut free.” This was far easier said than done. In the end, Arol and I took turns holding the large fruit and sawing at the stem. It finally came free and it rolled back into my chest. I sat down abruptly and gazed at the miraculous thing sitting in my lap.

Ripe pika fruit was my favourite food; it was everyone’s favorite. The rind was soft and thick; it was delicious peeled off and fried or baked to a delectable crunchy texture. The dense flesh had the texture of roasted yams, and it tasted like honeyed and spiced groundnuts.

When almost over-ripe, the fruit was so sweet and soft that the juice would run down your face. The huge nut at the center of each one was full of the protein and health-some nutriment that all the parents in town raved about. We liked it anyway. It could be roasted, and eaten in slices, or slivered and toasted. A few times every year, we started up the smoke-house and cured as many as we could. Da liked to slice smoked pika-nut thin, fry it in goat butter and serve it with eggs or fresh greens.

Da helped us to wrestle it into another bag. “We take every fruit, then the plant will produce again. But if we leave one fruit on, it will just get larger until it explodes and goes to waste.”

Once the fruits were off the pika, he cut some of the leaves off at the stems, to reveal the best prize yet, pika barbs. The barbs were small yet, as thick as my Da’s finger and twice as long, pale brown in color. He lifted and moved leaves, scouting along the height of the plant. We found nine barbs, essentially giant thorns. Some curved hooks and some spikes which were straight as blades. Da and Davlis transformed the pika barbs into pikalia, the famous Ilian fighting sticks.

“These are all too small for us yet. But we can help them along...”

Da reached into his bag and pulled out the bag of tiny iron clips. I had seen these made in the forge, but did not know their use. Each was as wide as his thumb and two inches long but bent like fishhooks with holes at the flat end. He chained two clips together and hooked one around the bottom of one of the barbs, and then stretched the other around the tip.

“While the pika barbs are small and pliable, you can encourage them to grow into any shape you like. This will force a sharper curve on the barb. Straight barbs are all variations on the same shape, but we guide the hooks if we can. If we luck upon a double curved barb, that is the best prize yet. I’ll show you what to do then.”

He had both of us try to loop a clip around the pika barbs, but our hands were nowhere near strong enough. He picked out three to be clipped and made short work of it. Then he cut more of the leaves from the plant, leaving fewer than half of them.

“Always leave enough leaves for the plant to live, just take the best leaves, un-torn, large and soft.”

“This is an excellent shaft,” he said as he wrapped clips around the stalk, in patterns I didn’t begin to understand. “I am just going to make some good hand-grips. While I do that, take a whiff of this.”

He cupped his hand around the very top of the plant, where there were a handful of long, fine tendrils, tipped in a deep black.

I sniffed deeply and gagged. The scent was like rotting onions piled beside a privy.

“Unforgettable, isn’t it?” Da said, as I scabbled in my pack, searching for water in a panic. “Trust me, you will never forget that smell. If the wind is blowing right, you will smell a ripening plant. Come smell, Arol.” But Arol had been watching and shook his head. Da shrugged. Life was not fair.

The last thing Da did was lay the spider trap at the base of the plant. He released the door with a pull chain. The spider ran out and right up the stem. “We ruined her fun today,” he said. “Every time you find a pika, you’ll have to trap the spider first. If you don’t see one, something is wrong with the plant, and just move on.”

“Are they poisonous?” asked Arol.

“A bite from one almost finished off your great grandma,” Da said cheerfully, “and she was a tough old thing.”

We backed carefully away from the pika, wrapped the leaves around the fruits and then re-nestled them in the bags.

He loaded two bags into his backpack. He looked about the area and picked up a long stick, then tied the last bag to the center of it.

We each crouched, put an end of the pole on our shoulders, and stood up. It made for a light burden. Happily, we followed Da home. He stopped within sight of the forest’s edge and searched until he found the string he had tied high onto the vine. It was a few inches above the forest floor.

“Did somebody pull the vine down?”

“No, I tied the string here so you could see how quickly the woods change. Since this morning, this vine grew,” he measured with his arm-span, “eight feet.” As he held the vine, it began to twine tightly around his fingers. “I have found the bones of a mountain lion wrapped in Corpus vines. Never let it get its grasp on you.” He pulled the vine off his finger and it left a viscous fluid behind that he wiped on his pants.

“The forest never stops changing. Never think you know it well. We’re almost home and nobody died. I say this was a good day.”

We exited the forest a few hundred yards along the ridge at Delphin Tor. Thirty feet wide and deep, with a rocky face that that was a sheer drop one hundred feet down. Right in the centre of the outcropping was Delphin Tor Tree. The tree was unique in all the world I knew of, which was admittedly a very small world.

The trunk was a grown man’s arm-span wide, and yet only the same arm-span tall; it supported a cloud of leafy branches that spread fifteen feet in every direction. In spring, enormous, burnt-orange, clustered flowers thickly covered every branch. From a distance, it could seem as if the tree was quietly aflame. One warm day every May, the leaves all opened, quite suddenly, like pale green fans, nearly obscuring the flowers. There was always a fest in town that evening.

As we walked underneath its sheltering branches, my sister Junia dropped awkwardly from the lower branches. She loved to hide in the tree.

“You gone all day.” She pointed an accusing finger at me.

“Sorry, Junie, but we have fresh pika leaves. I’ll make you a new cap.”

“A twisty strap like them?” she pointed at my own cap.

“If you like.”

My sister Junia was taller than me by a full foot. She was near sixteen, my elder by almost three years. But by the measure of the stardust inside us, I had long since surpassed her. Junia’s head was in the stars, as was her heart, and she trod lightly on the soil of the world. It worried me that she was so very pretty.

We walked down the ridge to find Sess and Davlis resting contentedly on the outside bench. Davlis watched us emerge from the forest, his feet up on an up-ended crate, a mug of red wine dwarfed in his massive hand. He saw the looks on our faces, and bellowed.

“Mara! Fresh pika!”

Our nearest neighbour, Mara was over the low gate by the time we arrived at the house, and she took one home in her strong arms, thanking Arol and I with kisses on our cheeks. Word spreads fast, and ten minutes later, another neighbour had stopped by and we sold the third one. Ripe pika doesn’t last long, before it rots and smells. And it brings good coin. Da added a few Trintaes to his string of Solaes, Duaes, and Quintaes.

Davlis was already chopping and stoking the hearth by the time the three of us had cleaned ourselves up. I gave up on my heavily burred leggings, a job for another day.

When we finally sat to eat, it was dark, but just warm enough to eat outside. Da made a toast. “To the brave hunters!”

“A kill on your first hunt!” Davlis jested loudly.

Da was the best cook in the family. He had cut the largest pika nut into small chunks, and fried them with onion root and potatoes. He poured light cream over thin strips of warmed pale-pink pika flesh and covered it in ground nutmeg and chopped peppers.

Junia filled a tiny bowl with seeds and we put it into the cage with the Brighteyes. Then we thanked our sister, the world, for our bounty and we ate.

3

My uncle Davlis and my Da ran the Delphin forge. My grandmother and great uncles had run it before them, and their parents and grandparents before that going back for as long as anyone knew. The forge was the oldest structure in town. At least parts of it were.

Davlis, the larger and older of the two brothers, was the happiest man in town. My Da very nearly matched him for joy in life. Sess, Arol, Junia and I completed our genial home of six, and we all lived together in the house Davlis had inherited as eldest son.

Sess and Arol's mother had left and then died before I was born. I had heard talk in town that this was partly why my uncle was indeed so very happy.

The house, the forge with tiny stables attached, the kitchen garden, storage shed, root cellar and a yard were all surrounded by a collapsing fence. In summers we pulled a rough table out of the shed and ate most meals outdoors. Comfortable benches sat against the south and west walls of the house and they were warm, protected spots to rest in the warming rays of the Mother Star.

The kitchen was bright, windowed and the best room in the house. We also had three rooms for sleeping and a winding staircase, to our rooftop balcony.

Da and Davlis each had their own room, Junia shared with Sess. Arol and I each curled up on pallets by the fire in the kitchen. In summers, we slept on the balcony.

We kept one horse in the stable; she was a light grey, but dappled on the behind with white spots like a deer, and a white mane and tail. She was so very well-tempered that even when I barely came to her knee, I'd had no fear of her. Davlis had bought her years before, hoping to teach her to jump and race, but a quiet trot was all that was in her nature. He named her Travesty.

Early mornings, after I had checked our fish traps, or fetched eggs from our Mara's hen house, I'd scoop a measure of grain and climb the stable gate to pour it into Travesty's trough. Trav nuzzled her warm snout into my hand lovingly before she bent her head to eat. Then I would run into the forge and stack fuel by the furnace.

Da and Davlis had let me start playing with bits of cold copper when I was strong enough to hold a tiny jeweler's hammer in my chubby fist. I was learning to fuse silver and iron together. I knew that someday soon they would let me learn to work pikalia.

The whole of the year, they worked in iron, silver, bronze and pika. It was Delphin's proximity to the forest that made the forge so valuable. Wild pika grew only in the forest at our backs and training to work it was an honour. The apprentices had come from surrounding towns, but occasionally a devotee came from the coast or Iliasa. Not all of them could take the meticulous detail of the pikalia-forging. Not all of them stayed. Not many of them stayed very long. I stayed. I had nowhere else to go, but that made no difference. I loved the

forge. I knew that when I grew older, I would work in the forge all the time, all my life. Well, all the time I wasn't in the woods.

The day after our first trip to the woods, Da was back in the forge and I was in the way.

“How do we find more? Will we go again tomorrow?”

Davlis grunted, “I might send you off on your own right now; put that down!”

Da, I learned, took to the woods in fine weather, and when work permitted. Davlis was far more immersed in the forge, and they were so aware of each other's moods and thoughts that each knew when it was time to get out from under each other's feet and find some space. Now I was under both their feet and I was leaving them little space or peace.

Davlis set me to polishing some arm-brace plates he was finishing for a falconer. Davlis liked to focus on pikalia, leaving this lesser work to apprentices, or me, the lowest on the ladder.

The finished pieces would be riveted to a thick leather sleeve, crafted by the leather-workers in town. To run the buffer, my knee rose and fell on the treadle in a steady rhythm that always felt like running on one leg. The soft buffers sprayed little bits of fluff and polish straight into my face. Each plate was like an oversized scale of a snake, with holes to rivet it to the sleeve. As I polished each inch-long plate I lay it down on a tray on the workbench in a pattern. As I set the last in place, the pattern nudged a memory.

The man in the forest, his belt had been of scales like this, like armor. What would be the purpose of such a belt? I wanted to see it. When would I get back to the woods?

I kept myself busy and out from underfoot, because I couldn't help but think of the shed, where doves had gotten in and left a mess that we were all ignoring. Experience had taught me that the first one of us to get in trouble next would be scraping dove-doo off the rough wooden walls.

Three long days later, Da finally said, “Back into the woods tomorrow then. Who's to come along?”

“Yahaw!” shouted Arol and I.

Sess, across the table, snorted. Sess disliked getting dirty. When she was at home, rather than in the student dorms in town, she stayed late after school and studied, or so she said. I knew already that she mostly strolled about town or snuck across the river with her friends.

Early next morning found us following Da back into the woods. I sometimes crept a few feet ahead, spying for animal signs of all kinds: fresh droppings, bits of fur caught on branches, flattened grasses, or nibbled leaves. We learned how the forest predators followed these signs themselves. When I lagged behind, I stopped to commit to memory path-side plants, small bogs, fallen logs, or epically large trees that made good way posts. I loved the smells of the place. I thought I could even learn to smell the pika from a distance.

We collected greens, mushrooms, roots and berries; a feast of delicious food. And we found another pika, this one with one fruit already burst, and four that were almost past ideal ripeness. We wrapped these carefully in layers of leaves to make sure we got them home safely. The burst fruit smelled rich, but rotted. Da cut it away from the plant, and with a tiny hand-shovel, he dug it in amongst the roots.

He clipped a few of the barbs again, and as I passed them to him, I noticed that each was marked with a small "S" for Smythor. We tore up piles of weeds and branches and built a huge pile of bracken around the plant, which turned out to be great fun.

"Tip that mess over, you mad things; make it look natural." Da said and had us tear it all down. We began again, making more casual piles. By the time we were finally done, Da was waiting impatiently. It was getting late.

We carried our haul down the path, Da in front, Arol next, and me straggling under the burden of a large pika fruit. I could hear them ahead of me, around a bend in the path.

I trudged along as quickly as I could, but stopped dead when the man with the boots stepped quietly from the thick trees and blocked my way. He pulled a long, heavy stick from behind his shoulder and swung its sharp end at me.

4

I dropped my bag and turned to run, but my way was blocked by an enormous sqyell. It was so big that some part of my brain calmly wondered if it was a female. Then another landed on the path, and another and another and another. That calm part of my brain was drowned out in wild panic. The big one pulled back her lips and began to hiss at me.

"CHSSSSS!! Chchchsssss!"

The others joined in and the noise drowned out all the other sounds around me. I turned to run straight into the dense woods, but the man pushed me aside, swinging his long stick in a quick blur, knocking the feet from under the first sqyells. She rolled, hissing, and then scrambled away. The others quickly scattered as he swung at them. He chased the last one off and then tucked the stick by his side and gracefully sat down on a rock right at the edge of the path. He looked at me expectantly.

"Was the big one a female?" I asked.

"You're an observant one, you are."

"I'm learning. My Da is teaching me."

He said nothing in reply, and his pale grey eyes examined me. I stared. Most everyone I knew had dark eyes, including me.

"Where did you get your boots?"

"Do you want to earn a pair?"

I nodded.

"Perhaps someday, you will."

"Olly!" I heard my Da call from ahead.

"Coming, Da!"

"Watch your back when you're alone." The man said.

“Thank you!” I thought to say. “For the sqyells.” He nodded .

As I walked, I looked back and saw him watching me until I turned the corner and he fell out of sight.

They were waiting for me sixty feet down the path. I scrambled after them, out of breath and never quite catching up, struggling under my burden the rest of the way home.

There were a few neighbours in our enclosure when we returned. We were pleased and proud with their confidence that we would return laden, and Da let us pocket the coin from one fruit each. It was the first Duae I ever earned. I ran my hand over its two curved sides, and later I carefully selected a string to run through the hole in its center.

Davlis sent us down to the forge to see Sess, who was bitterly trying to pull fine dove feathers off her clothes and cap. Some had worked their way into the long plaits she let hang down from her cap. Davlis had discovered her after-school activities and she had been scraping bird droppings out of the shed the last few hours. We were sad to have missed the shouting. She was boiling buckets of water on the huge fire and Davlis thought we might as well clean ourselves too.

When we had shared out the water, we disrobed and scrubbed ourselves down. There was plenty of water, and we all took off our caps, and even lathered up our hair, then rinsed from a common bucket. Sess had brought a clean long shirt for each of us, mine dropping to well past my knees. It felt cozy and pleasant to be as clean as this, but I wouldn't want to have to bathe every day.

Back in the house, a warming fire was lit. Junia had helped Davlis to make a pika stew with fresh garden herbs and cabbage. I was hungry; it seemed extra delicious. With my stomach full, I was more than ready for sleep. Only as I was lying on my pallet by the fire did I think to ask.

“The man with the boots, Da, who is he?”

“Boots?” he asked.

“The man on the path in the forest today, with the boots. That one.”

He bent near me, and stroked my almost dry hair. “We didn't see anyone today, Olly.”

How could they have missed him? He had to have been just off the path when they passed.

“I'm an observant one,” I said.

“Goodnight, Olly,” he said, pulling my blankets up over my head.

Next day was a rare lazy day. Arol and I woke outside, when the light of the Mother Star warmed us on our pallets. Davlis and Da must have lifted us bodily and carried us out onto the ground. We rose slowly, but were soon tearing around the yard full of the joy of a bright clear day.

Da and Davlis emerged from the forge with Junia, all of them shining and clean, freshly bathed.

Sess joined us all at the table in the yard for toasted bread with honey, and then we dressed in short leggings and sleeveless shirts and strolled en masse to the river. We set up fishing lines by tying them to tall sticks. At a bend in the river, which formed a rocky pool, we wedged them into rock piles and sat on the bank,

warming ourselves. Sess had brought some copper combs with her, and as we lazed, she took it upon herself to re-braid our hair.

The foothills of the Callan's were a rich and fertile place to live: fish in the streams, fresh pika from the forest, verdant crops, abundant flowing water that everyone said was rich in minerals. Whatever the combination of elements that contributed to our bodily health lent itself in abundance to the health of our renowned hair. "Hill-Hair" was what those from away called it. I had also heard traders at the market saying, "You mink-men, why you hide it under your caps is a mystery." I saw the traders in Delphin who were not born and raised here, and their hair had always seemed sickly to me - too thin, too flat and pallid in colour.

Delphin babies arrived with a healthy head of hair. Women almost never cut their hair and when unbound, it reached past their knees. Men, as their moods dictated or for financial need, grew theirs out a foot or two. Then they would tie a long braid of it back and cut it off to their shoulders. The long plait could be sold, then woven into thread, or yarn, or even remarkably strong, gleaming rope. I had heard stories of magically beautiful tapestries with Delphinian hair woven into them. A famous tale told of a Delphin woman's hair that grew way past her feet, and it was cut from her body just before she went to the Father Star. They wove it into a fifty-foot rope and from it hung a bell in the tower of the temple in Iliasa. They called it the Bell of Millia.

At night, a crowd of uncapped Delphin heads would all appear the same, shining, dense hair, as deeply coloured as dark chocolate. When the Mother Star shone on us, the differences appeared.

Davlis's dark hair was almost black, and poker straight, with a silver sheen that even caught reflections off the sparkling water of the river. His children Sess and Arol had inherited the same, the three of them unmistakable as family. Silver lights glimmered as their heads turned this way and that, watching the river flow by, fish jump, or Da as he held Junia's hand, and she waded barefoot in the sandy shallows.

Junia's hair, though dark as all of ours, glowed like the Mother Star with golden, almost butter yellow highlights. Junia had a dress that was almost yellow, admittedly a very browned and faded yellow, but it was her favourite. I hoped she knew how it brought out the lights of her hair. I think she did, considering how often she wore it instead of sensible leggings.

My Da's head was a mess of wavy soft tendrils. When the light of the Mother Star fell on his hair, it gleamed and flickered like fire, red and orange playing against each other in the dark mass. Stray curls seemed brighter yet.

As Sess sat behind me and ran her comb through my hair, I pulled a handful of it over my face and looked through it. I had been told that I had my Da's hair, and I could see for myself that it curled and flickered like fire, just as his did. I knew from watching him that his hair, and mine too, would even glow in firelight. I sighed with contentment, and leaned back into Sessia's knees.

We caught a few string of trout, Arol rising from time to time to pull them to bank, smack them against the rocks, and then stack them in a basket. Eventually, it was time to head back. Gutting the fish by the river

attracted the local cats, and we tossed them the heads and messy insides. They purred and ran off with their treasure.

Davlis carried a neat bowl of fish fillets as we trailed behind him back to the house. As he set the fish to frying, the rest of us retrieved our caps and tucked our hair underneath them.

All of our caps were made of pika leaves. We all learned to make caps when young. It was an easy matter. Fresh pika leaves felted easily simply by rubbing fingers and thumbs back and forth over the surfaces. I could pull a leaf onto my own head and pull and twist it into a simple cap in fifteen minutes.

Most of us preferred a more complex style, with two long woven strips hanging from each side, which we could wrap around and round each plait, revealing little of the hair underneath. We were proud of our hair for it marked us, so unmistakably, as Delphinian, but at home, or in town, it hardly paid to be vain about something we all had. Also, while tradition bade us to treasure our thick hair, tying it back and keeping it safe out of our way provided ease in day-to-day life.

Also the hill air was fresh and often cool; a cap was the best way to retain body-heat. And I suppose when it came down to it, we in Delphin were a modest people.

Da served dinner, one enormous platter of fish, which we grabbed with our hands and ate enthusiastically.

Afterward, Davlis asked Junia and I to help him with his hair. We stood on either side of him, making thick braids. As we did, he tried to get us to smell his cap. More specifically, he tried to shove it into our faces while we worked.

Pika leaves were naturally absorbent and insulating. A cap worn for many weeks and months fit itself more perfectly to the head of the wearer, becoming ingrained in and undeniably imbued with the owner's personality. Davlis had had this particular cap for longer than my memory extended back.

"Come on, Olly, smell my cap, I think you'd like it. Very invigorating."

"NO!" I batted at him with the comb.

"You don't know what you are missing."

"Yes, I do know every single thing that I'm missing, and not one of those things is the chance to smell your cap."

"But it smells surprisingly like flowers." He almost got past my swatting hands and got the foul thing to my already offended nose.

"I have smelled enough flowers lately, thanks," I said, thinking of the pika fronds and that smell indelibly printed in my mind.

"Enough!" he finally said. "I am tired of this mane anyway." He tied a leather cord around his braids and used a sharp knife to roughly hack them both off. He tossed them on the table. "I'll sell it at the market this week. Fermin, let's cut yours too, we could use a string of coin."

In the woods, I did not see the man in the boots for a long while. Junia thought he was maybe from across the border. I breathlessly recounted tiny adventures to Junia and she listened sometimes spellbound, sometimes ignoring me and playing with her old ragdoll. I never knew what would capture her interest. She loved to hear of tiny animals, but she seemed bored by my endless fascination with the pika, unless we brought home fresh fruit. I tried to always bring her back some small thing she could enjoy, a flower, or a pebble from a stream, a branch covered in lichen or moss, or twining vines that had dried into pretty shapes. She would clap her hands in delight and hug me.

I was perhaps overly pleased to realize that my woodcraft grew faster than Arol's. I was the first of us to find a pika on my own.

Da taught us birdcalls, which we practiced until we drove everyone near mad. We hiked through the trees, several yards apart, whistling back and forth to stay in contact. I could barely hear my Da picking his way through the underbrush, ten feet to my right, but I could clearly make out Arol, ten feet further away still. He had big feet for his size, and he had trouble learning to step quietly and smoothly. He grumbled as branches caught his sleeves. I learned how not to move by watching Arol. But I also watched Da, and began to learn how to move properly. I watched the sqyells and ermine, snakes slithering so silently, and the tiny spring fawns, and learned even more.

Da's guidance woke an innate instinct that told me where an adder or one of the huge rat spiders might be hiding.

Sometimes we came back laden with pika, and others with hands empty but for a few greens. Or we would find pika, but the plants were young, the fruit immature, the barbs too small. We always hid them well, and in the evening Da marked them in charcoal on the rough map he had.

The map.

It was on smooth, oiled canvas, very old, very precious, and had been revised so many times that it was a bit of a mess. New paths were sometimes blazed through the forest, or they disappeared through lack of use. Often large, landmark trees fell, and Da, and his ma and da, had altered the map accordingly. It was worn through in spots, on others built up with layers of paint. When I had first looked at the map, it seemed senseless to me.

Now, I could see how dotted lines showed long-used pathways; grey marks meant pika we had hidden; and black hatches were the pattern over the larger bogs, the ones that stayed almost unchanged year to year. There were a few large hills that were marked far back beyond where we had ever yet ventured with Da.

When I had first discovered the map's existence, I was incensed.

"Why didn't we always bring it with us?"

"You can't count on the map, Olly. You needed to learn to find your own way. Now the map will help you more." He was right. I now knew not to hope to memorize what could not be held in place. I had learned to

find my own way, as I needed to do. I helped him to fill it in, bit by bit, scraping off paint in places, and watching him carefully repaint.

Everything I did seemed a part of finding my way through the woods.

6

And back in Delphin, Ilia's WanderGuard marched in and staked their encampment just south of town. The captain and lieutenants stayed in The Rabbits' Hook. Nightly, extra tables added in the square filled with soldiers. There were three companies of the Wanderguard: Peace, Fortune and Haven. It took each of them a full year to circle the whole country, which brought a rotation of the Guard through Delphin every four months.

Their arrival in town meant an interesting market day, with marvelous goods from away, and trade was brisk. We lucked into several pika one spring day, and upon emerging from the forest at the crest of the hill, we saw the encampment and descended right into town to sell. The innkeepers, Gavin Freeman and his wife Sara, paid extra for the fruit, knowing they could charge each soldier handsomely for the rarified fresh treat.

"Save some for Tedd and Gregga!" I told Sara, their mother. I wanted my friends to know I had brought in the pika they would enjoy.

She absently patted my cheek. "I'm not a fool, Olly." Da also sold one right to the captain of the guard, who roughly hacked it open at the table and passed slices out to his men. We were lucky to have made this foraging trip today. While the guard was in town, we would be too busy to get back to the woods.

We turned for home, and saw Davlis riding toward us on Travesty.

"Pikali samples and dried pika fruit," he said, patting the saddle bags. "We'll bring in coin tonight."

Davlis loved to sit in The Rabbits' Hook and hear tales of away and spar with the guard. Davlis had learned to blunt the razor sharp pikalia points with thick leather finials, to lessen the accidents and bloodshed.

"But there is nothing like a little drama to boost sales," he said.

He would get home late, or even early the next day, and wake us all with singing and wine-breath. It was hard to begrudge him this, and we knew that he spent the nights making profitable deals.

Under an ancient mandate, our forge proudly provided all the pikalia the Iliaguard used, and had for generations. Many pikalia were handed down through families, or won in duels, and we were told that in the castle in Iliasa, there were stacks of pikalia to train new recruits. Still, there was always a market for more, and more yet. We charged what some called a king's ransom for the weapons. I suppose that in the end it was the king who indeed paid, but it was the guard who handed the coin over to us. And men who had been on the waiting list for new pikalia were willing to bribe Davlis to move their name to the top of the list. Guards who had squirreled some funds away, or who came from noble stock with nobler funds, always desired a custom-made pikalia.

The pika was generous to us, but unpredictable, and if someone had an order that was overly specific, it could take us years to fill it, while we searched, or molded, the right pika barbs to suit their needs.

The captain of the guard, or his aide, carried a list of specific requests for special shapes of hook or blade or shaft, some for the BorderGuard, more for the KingsGuard.

Pikalialia were delicately balanced and each one was slightly different. Learning to use one proficiently could take a lifetime of practice. Sadly, some of the finest pikalia, which we had laboured over so carefully, hung decoratively above fireplace mantles, while their owners fought with a plainer piece, with which they found a resonance.

Creating pikalia was not a precise science. It was by almost all measurements a craft. Some would say an art.

The two secrets of our forge were simple. Know where to find the pika barbs and how to work them.

Without each secret, the other was useless; and these secrets were our lifeblood. My ancestors - the Smythors of Delphin - had always guarded them well by guarding them as loosely as possible.

The Delphinian Woods were open to anyone who wanted to wander in, and it was the only place pika grew. Wandering the woods, hoping to chance upon an elusive plant when the barbs were mature, was time-consuming, and not for everyone.

Also, we always needed trained hands in the forge. It could take a dozen years to master forging the pikalia, at which point, who could afford them but the king? In short, anyone who wanted to know could learn this craft. Many did. New apprentices passed through the forge quickly though talent was kept on. And luckily, in every generation, there were those in my family who had the passion for it, and the forge stayed in our hands.

Davlis ruled in the forge. Da ruled in the woods. But they both agreed that they made the best pikalia when they worked together.

The basic form of a pikalia was a long shaft, with a blade-like spike at one end, and a sharp hook at the other. The shaft was pika stem. The spike was one long, straight pika barb, three to twelve inches long. Blunt on one side, but on the reverse, sharp and cutting with a tip that tapered to a deadly point. The other end was the hook, as curved and sharp as a raptor's talon. By nature's whim, or through the ministrations of my Da, the sharp tips curved right back toward the base of the barb, or to the left or right, or twisted about so the hook was a spiral, or a sinuous 'S' shape.

Everyone had their own fighting style, and we made pikalia for each and every one. Double hooks or spikes and wildly curved shafts in which I could not see the benefit were common requests. The subtle variations were truly endless.

Young pika plants were springy and pliable. As the plant matured, they firmed up miraculously. Over months of growth, the stem and barbs became as tough as an oak, and when cut and dried properly, stronger than iron, as tensile as a spring, and yet as light as dry pinewood. Once passed through our forge, pika was the hardest substance known. To anyone, anywhere.

Davlis had a theory about that. "Some blasted, magic thing in that dank nightmare of a forest toughens it so it can survive the horrors of growing there."

Davlis was less fond of the woods than Da or me.

We tried to harvest only as much pikalia material as we could use before age hardened it so much that it became unmalleable. Da cut the pika stems to various lengths, some with barbs of all shapes and sizes still attached. If harvested when still pliable enough, he cut deep notches into the ends of both barb and stems. Then they might be left to dry a while, and age.

Davlis and Da would lay out a shaft, then match a spike and a hook to either end, knowing by instinct which would make a good fit. If the ends were notched, they would cut, or burn out bits, until the pieces fit together.

Not only was mature pika hard, but it also burned with a brilliant, searing fire. We flamed the fire with pika leaves, then added rejected stems to the flame. The resulting fire was like lightning. The only way to get enough heat to carve and control pika was to burn pika itself.

Even when glowing white-hot in the forge, the only tools hard enough to cut through pika were ancient saws and chisels made from nothing but nothing but even more ancient pika barbs. Nothing is harder than pika, except for continually hardening, older pika.

Each sculptured joint was worked in the fire until the pieces fit together like a cluster of clasped fingers. Next, this joint was slowly infused with an alloy of silver and iron, and then smoothed until the seams could not be felt. This alloy itself was only possible in a fire of sufficient heat.

Ilia was a broad country and extended from where Delphin lay in the eastern foothills to the western shores in the province of Restitia. It is on those shores where early astrologers had seen the crystalline sands of our beaches that glowed day and night with the absorbed love of the Mother Star, and known they could create the finest glass lenses imaginable.

Because of this wealth of knowledge, we had smallscopes, farscopes and even starscopes. We had all three in our own temple in Delphin. Using a smallscope, my great-great-grandmother had shown how the alloy-infused joints were stronger than they had ever even been planned for: how the alloy permeated into the material of the pika through countless, miniscule porous veins in the stem and barb.

At the end of day, the fire was let to die down, and we brushed out the ash of the pika and stored it carefully. Later, this ash was mixed with lanolin, lavender and water. Leather strips were boiled in the mixture. Once permeated with the ash, the strips would be lashed onto the pikali joints in elaborate patterns, forming handgrips. When the leather strips dried and hardened, they retained the tactile feeling of leather, but were imbued with the strength of the pika.

Also, because of the lavender, they smelled really nice.

Oscar, the youngest apprentice, and I spent much time together wrapping and then rewrapping the handgrips to Da and Davlis's satisfaction.

Each resulting pikali appeared to be grown as one solid, grey piece, darkening to black at the tips. Rivets or plates of silver decorated the finished pikalia. This material, which grew in a few seasons, burned like the

stars, hardened like stone, stayed tensile as metal. Is there a wonder at all why I was so obsessed with the pika? Not to mention the delicious fruit, the useful leaves, and the chance to wander the woods all my days searching for it.

7

The only thing that tore me away from the forge was school. And this was not by choice. I was torn kicking and screaming some days.

On my first-ever day of school, Da walked into town just to walk me back home. He held my tiny hand in his massive one. His hands were always warm, but heavily calloused. He asked me what I thought of school.

“It makes my bottom sore, and you have to sit all day and not run around. And if you do you get in trouble.”

“Aye, I remember that from school myself. But what else did you think? Did you learn any letters?”

“I already know all the letters.” I had sat over the shoulder of my cousin Sess as she had done her homework for the last few years. “So,” I announced, “I don’t think I’ll go back.”

We were walking home by the river. Da picked up some flat stones, and flung one to skitter across the surface of the Delph.

I threw a few pebbles and they sank like - well, just like stones.

“Olly, wrap your index finger around the edge, then twist yourself forward and fling it, and let the stone roll along your finger, like this.” He sent another stone skipping across the water.

I picked up the biggest, darkest one that I had been saving for last. I wrapped my head around what he had said, then wrapped my finger around the stone. I twisted my arm back, flung it forward and let the stone fly.

As I released, Da said, “However many times it skips, that is how many years you will stay in school.”

I swung my head to stare at him open-mouthed, then swung back to watch the stone hit the surface of the water, and bounce. I would swear that time itself slowed down for us. My stone landed again, and bounced less high, less far this time. I found myself standing; I have no idea how. It skipped again, tiny water droplets flowering out from it; and then thrice more. The random stone that spelled my doom sank beneath the surface with a tiny splash.

“Six years,” Da said. “At the very least, six years.”

So from the age of seven, I spent three days every week in the school that was old when my great grandfathers had attended. It sat on Delphin square opposite the temple; dorms and shops stood on the other two sides. Market days, the square filled with stalls. Fest days, it filled with musicians and dancing.

The Rabbits’ Hook Inn was named after the trailing end of the wide, arcing, white Rabbit Track that bisected the night sky. Tables spilled out onto the paving stones in fair weather. Arol and I had some of the same friends; he made them more easily than I. But we both ran with Tedd and Gregga, the innkeeper's son and daughter, so I knew the Rabbit well.

Aside from Tedd and Gregga, who were twins, there was Emil. Emil was always ready for any fun to be had. His ma was from away, so though his hair was much like mine, he had much darker skin, near as dark as his Ma's, and green eyes. We in the hills were so much alike with dark hair and eyes and caramel skin that Emil was a novelty.

In the forest, I was fearless and the born leader, soaking up woodcraft like a sponge; but in school, Arol was the shining star. He was a mere two years older than me, but had rushed through eight years of schooling in only six so next fall he would be there six days a week for the next two years. He still outshone every pupil in his class, all the more impressive since he did nearly all of my schoolwork too. This left us free to swim in the river or run rampant through the square with friends.

Catheryn, Delphin's chief astrologer, made us pore over star charts, trying to grasp the endless swirling patterns of the skies.

The Father Star was always overhead, and all the other stars flew through the skies around him. Every other bright twinkling light we beheld was Mother Star to another world. So much life-giving energy, it was too much for me to grasp. The Mother Stars whirling around the Father Star, and the worlds whirling and spinning around their Mothers. Many worlds, like ours, had Little Brother or Sister Moons, who spun around them in turn; all of us in an endless whirling dance through the entirety of all that there is. This propensity of the skies to dance was a delight to me. What better choice could the stars have made? Yet the dance was so intricate, the movements so subtle, that we could scarce view a single exchange of places in the span of our fleeting lives.

So that is how the astrologers spent their time: watching to see a world crossing paths with a distant cousin and explaining in endless, droning detail what that would mean for our Mother Star, and for us.

“Olly!”

I jumped guiltily. Catheryn seldom raised her voice. “It took hours to focus the starscope to see the juncture of the three planets! What have you done?”

I did like looking through the massive starscope in the temple, and the knobs were fun to fiddle with, even if the complexities of astrology left me bored to distraction. Catheryn refocused the starscope and we got to see each star in The Maiden, The Winged Horse, The Elk Circle, The Dancing Coyotes, The Standing Man, The Coiling Snake, The Starilia, The Wild Hunter, and The Flying Thunderbird. I could even make out individual stars in the wide, white Rabbit Track.

The other teachers, Karin and Mikhail taught numbers, letters and history; the structures of plants, rocks, metals, and animals; the force in fire, water, air, and matter. I stared out the windows and dreamed of the woods.

When Arol spent a few nights studying at the temple, Da took me for an overnight trip.

With just the two of us, we could take Travesty and load our sleeping rolls and extra provisions onto her back. We set out at first light. I squirmed with excitement and Da chided me for upsetting Trav, but she and I knew each other well. I reached behind me to pat her rump and she answered with a contented nicker.

Da pressed her to her highest speed, a canter, which soon slowed to a trot, then a walk. We never had the heart to press her too hard, and the trails were ever winding and narrow. Regardless, we managed to penetrate far further into the forest than I ever had before, but instead of heading our habitual south, this day we cut almost straight east, roughly following the bank of the river. Da seemed to have a destination in mind. We rode most of the day, pausing only for a brief lunch of one small pika fruit we had come across. He cut it in half with his belt-knife, and we simply sank our faces into the flesh.

I sat happily in front of Da and held onto the reins. In the middle of one wide path, Travesty halted and wouldn't move another inch forward. Her ears went back and she snorted, and began to awkwardly work her way backward.

“Hai, Trav. What's the problem?” Da nudged her with his heels.

“She doesn't want to step over that log, Da.” It was ten inches high and lay right across the path.

“She's stepped over logs larger than that with her eyes closed. Flick the reins a little more, Olly.” I did, but she kept backing up. “Olly, give me the reins, I... whoa! Pull back!”

Da suddenly was helping Trav back up and I glanced down to see the log start to writhe and twist. It undulated across the path for several long seconds until it lengthened out to a finely pointed tail that gave one last flick as it disappeared into the brush.

“That's the biggest snake I've ever seen!” Da yelled in my ear. “Smart girl, Trav!” He stroked her ears and she whinnied in response.

As soon as the snake was gone, Trav was willing to move on. The forest was even more dense here and more of a maze. As we rode, Da notched trees high so we could spot the quick markers from her back.

Late afternoon, we came to a widening in the river, which provided a fairly shallow ford, and we waded across. Da hiked ahead of us now, hacking down branches with a machete. The path had decayed. I had, at times past, helped him to re-cut paths, but this was much better because I got to sit atop the horse and watch him. He swore wildly and I made note of the most impressive epithets. His voice grew quieter. No, that was not it. Something was drowning out the sound of his voice, a hissing roar. He hacked through a net of vines, and they slowly draped away to the ground, so, up on Travesty, I saw it just before him. A nearly vertical river, flowing out of the sky to fill a large pool.

He looked back at my stunned face and grinned. “Alright if we make camp here then?” he asked.

My response was wildly enthusiastic.

“Watch your language, child!”

Our campsite was magical, like the setting of a story. The pool was in a small clearing. Above our heads, the river flowed over the edge of a fifty-foot-high rock face. It fell straight down thirty feet, into a

smaller pool, and from there it flowed over twenty feet of stone, bubbling and gurgling into the larger pool at our feet, then flowed away into a tiny tributary of the Delph. Ancient, massive trees surrounded us, and we picked up fallen branches and covered them with the vines from the trail Da had blazed, creating a small lean-to, which faced the natural fire-pit formed by stones at the edge of the pool.

Da took out a bag and poured a wide circle of some foul-smelling powder around the camp.

“Sulfur, lime, ground forge-slag, and a few other worse smelling things. Woodbane keeps the vines from creeping over us, and the little beasties away.”

We ran some lines into the water. Travesty was tied loosely to a tree, with space to wander and nibble at grasses.

Da walked to the edge of the rock face. “We’ll take a short hike before dark; follow me.” And he put both hands on the rocky face and started climbing.

A hike? I stood at the bottom of the sheer rocky wall and watched him. He was only a few feet above me. He looked down and grinned. I stared back unsure what to do. Da leapt down, lifted me up by the waist and placed my feet into shallow footholds, and he pointed to where I should place my hands. I slowly lifted one foot at a time, clinging for dear life to the handholds, and then I moved my hands, and once again each foot. It was painstaking and arduously slow. I pulled myself onto to a small platform I could stand on, clung to the wall and chanced a glance down.

My feet were on a level with Da’s eyes, all of six feet from the ground. He quickly hefted himself onto the platform, and pointed up again. Suddenly it seemed bearable. Da encouraged me all the way up, pushed me over the final edge, and was quickly beside me. I made the mistake of looking down and my head reeled. I guess I didn’t like high places much. We had climbed to the top of the small cliff, but still stood at the base of higher hills. The river was to our right and it twisted away through hills and trees and disappeared. Da bent down and took off his boots and leggings. I followed his lead. He took my hand and we stepped right into the water and walked up the flat riverbed. Canyon walls and tall trees were on either side as we waded upstream for fifteen minutes. My lower legs were numb in five. The trees suddenly thinned and we emerged onto a hilly land through which flowed a massive river. I could see that the river we had waded through was tiny in comparison.

“Da...?”

He pointed to the suddenly small stream we had stepped out of and said, “This is the River Delph, or part of it at least. There are a few other tributaries, and that,” he pointed to the river ahead of us, “. . . is the Callilian. It is the river that surrounds Ilia on the east and south sides. Across it is Coronado.”

“But we got here in one day! I thought the forest was huge!”

“Oh, it is huge, Olly, We cut across the top. Delphin is almost at the northern tip of the forest, close to the border. But the border winds with the river and south of here, the border is many miles into the woods.

“Can we cross into Coronado?” I asked, suddenly warming to the idea of telling Arol I had entered a whole other country, when he had never even been further than one town away.

“Not today,” he answered, his hand on my shoulder. “I don’t relish dealing with their BorderGuard, or ours for that matter. There are still tender feelings on either side of this border.”

“But we can stick our toes into the river and say we did that. Can’t we?”

He began to turn back to the stream. “No, we’d best get back.” But he whirled around suddenly and began to run down to the river. “Race you!” he shouted over his shoulder.

I leapt after him, stumbling in my bare feet, but gaining on him slowly. The river bank was two hundred paces away and I caught up to him just in time to splash into it alongside him. He caught me in his arms and swung me into the shallows and we collapsed laughing onto the pebbled riverbed.

The river was wide and looked deep, but I could see birds splashing about on the other side. I eyed the distance.

“No, we are not crossing it.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“I was your age once Olly, and no.”

Ignoring my dramatic sighs, Da stepped up on the bank and reached down to help me up the short rocky slope. So it was that I saw the soldiers first, as they surrounded him and thrust the terrifyingly sharp ends of their weapons at his throat.

9

The two on either side of him held long clubs, or perhaps swords. I could not tell. Another held a club over his shoulder casually, though his stance was anything but casual.

“Is the border treaty disregarded by all Ilians? Or is it just you two?” he asked. He began to swing the club back and forth, edging us back toward the river. He talked funny. His words were clipped and short and he made the “R” sounds all fuzzy. We tried to back away, but more soldiers were behind us now, shepherding us away from the river with their own clubs.

Da pulled me behind him, which made no sense since more than a dozen now surrounded us on all sides. I stared at their clubs. Three feet long with a faceted head the size of Davlis’ fist, and a handgrip just below. The other end was a slender rod that came to a deadly point. They were both swords and clubs. Even more of the sharp ends were pointed at us now.

“We just cooled down in the river, we are back on Ilian land now.”

The man who had spoken smashed the club end at Da's chest and Da tumbled down onto his back. The man swung the weapon smoothly until the point was pressing against my Da's chest. “You trespassed in the river.”

“I thought the river was common ground.” I could hear no fear in Da’s voice. Pride for him swelled somewhere within my terror.

“We have no common ground with Ilia,” said the same man, “and we never will.” With one hand he gripped the end of his club and with the other he held the sharp end up to Da’s chest as though he was going to thrust it in. Da did not even flinch. I moved to throw myself in front of him but felt hands lock tight around my arms. The men laughed at me as I struggled against their grip.

A boat drifted into sight on the river below us. There were some few men in it, staring up at us. The man at the front surveyed the scene impassively.

“Sergeant Beltois, what was the commotion?”

Without lifting his eyes or his weapon from my Da, the same man answered. “These two, Sir Barsel. Ilians in the river.”

The man in the boat cast his eyes over us; barefoot, dripping wet, empty-handed.

“Can you not tell the difference between a family picnic and an invading army, Beltois?”

I saw anger flash in the man’s eyes as he spoke.

“We patrol the river for any trespass.”

“And you caught a child on a swimming lesson. Let them go. Get back into the boat.”

The hands released me and I flew into Da's arms as he pulled himself up. As he sauntered away, Beltois belligerently let his weapon slide over Da’s chest, neatly cutting his shirt and drawing a thin line of blood. The others filed resentfully past us. When the last one passed. I stuck my head out from behind Da.

“Can I see your club?” I asked.

“Olly!” Da hissed.

The man had halted. He was tall and thin and had huge dark eyes. He glanced at the man in the boat, Sir Barsel, who shrugged slightly. The tall man held the club out to me and I tried to understand. The rod was some sort of hard metal and the club end was dense hardwood. The joinery was covered by the handgrip. It was quite deadly looking. I liked it. I reached out to touch the point and felt a drop of blood well up on my fingertip.

“Ow!”

“Is sharp enough for you, little Ilian?”

Da pulled my hand back and the tall man spoke to him.

“This was my father’s before it was mine. More Ilians died on the point of its blade than you could count with your little Ilian mind. More Ilian skulls has it smashed than there are stars in the sky. Child is brave. Would be better if child was smart.”

“In the boat, Peregrine.” Everyone else was aboard then, Beltois in the back, glaring at us. The tall man leapt down and stepped lightly into the wooden craft. I hadn’t seen many boats before, just little rowboats on the Delph. This one easily held twenty men.

Sir Barsel glanced back at us as they rowed away.

“I would not want to have to explain how we captured an unarmed man and a child, but if we see you here again, I will not hesitate to show you what the closed border means.”

As the boat floated past us, the one called Beltois suddenly swung his club. Da jumped aside to barely avoid it, knocking me to the ground.

He scooped me up quickly and began to run back to the woods. He didn't put my feet on the ground for fifty paces, and when he finally did, I ran as fast as I could. When we reached the cover of the woods, I glanced at him and saw he was grinning, and by the time we splashed into the stream, he was fighting back laughter.

He gripped me tightly to him as the water flowed around our feet. "Stars, I should not have taken you there, Olly. Never tell Davlis! Don't tell anyone. This was madness."

"Except for that Beltwa and Peargreen, they seemed nice."

"Nice! Our history with them is not nice. War brings out terrible things in perfectly nice people. We have fought over the crown for centuries, Olly. Now, even with the crown gone, the war festers in our hearts. I hope you never live to see the bloodshed that marked my youth."

"What is the big deal about this crown?" I rubbed my finger where a weapon that had apparently slaughtered my fellow Ilians had nicked me.

"It is more than a crown, Olly. It is a weapon. It somehow opened the Oval Gate to who knows where. It is the symbol of power and the power itself." He paused a moment. "For those who like power, it is irresistible. They say the man who forged it went mad, though I would say it was madness itself to forge such a thing."

The light was at our back and the shadows of the trees were lengthening rapidly. It was easier wading downstream, and soon we were lacing our boots back on. Da climbed down before me. I kept my gaze on the rock face and looked anywhere but down.

We had caught a trout on one of the lines. I gutted it while Da built up a fire.

"What is the Oval Gate, Da?"

He was silent a moment. "I have only heard tell of it, but it still gives me bad dreams. It appeared when the crown was made. A huge hole to nothing. A gateway to blackness."

I couldn't picture it. We ate beside the pool as fireflies flitted around the waterside. The sound of the water lulled me to sleep.

In the middle of the night, I woke. The embers of our fire still glowed enough to dimly light the face of the man sitting at pool's edge. But I didn't need to see his face, I recognized his boots. I sat up. He gestured toward my sleeping Da, and then held a finger to his lips.

I nodded and lay back down. I was watching him as I fell back into sleep. It brought me strange comfort knowing he watched over us.

We woke and splashed about joyfully in the pool. I climbed to the upper pool and found it to be a perfectly sculpted bowl. Lying in it, the water falling from above pounded onto my back and I soon staggered out sputtering and leapt into the lower pool. Much too soon we scooped the woodbane back into the pouch. A few vines had twined right to its edges and paw and claw prints told stories of nocturnal visitors. We dismantled

our lean-to, and Da bound the two long pine poles onto Travesty's side. I was sad to leave this place. I lingered as Da finished packing our things.

"We'll come back soon," he promised me.

Da led Travesty down the path, it was too narrow with the poles tied to her, and I followed. The reason for the poles became apparent fairly soon. After we re-forded the river, we started passing pika we had marked the day before. Da tied one pole to either side of Travesty's saddle and lashed a shorter stick to the ends. We looped a blanket over the two poles and made a travois.

We made quick work of each pika, seven plants in all. We took all the fruit, ripe or not, and cut down all but one for their large barbs. The travois was filled to bursting, as were our packs and Travesty was happy at the slow pace we made on the way back. I ended up snuggled in front of Da, fast asleep by the time we reached home. I barely remember nestling into my pallet before I was once again asleep.

10

Da and Davlis often sparred in the yard with leather-tipped pikalia. I had seen the guard fighting, and Da and Davlis were as good as the very worst of them, but they liked the exercise, and it was beneficial to their trade to know how to wield the weapons they wrought.

Arol and I were finally allowed to pick up the practice pikalia. They would make these by finding young pika plants, and breaking the tips off the barbs repeatedly, so that they matured and hardened with a blunt end. My favourite was just three feet long, unembellished, with a long, leather wrapped spike and a deeply curved hook at the other. I could loop the hook around my own arm and swing it up and around my head and it was blunt enough that I could use it to reach up and scratch behind Travesty's ears.

Arol and I flung ourselves artlessly together, barking like dogs. Junia gasped at and cheered on our prowess: we tripped over our own feet as often as we felled each other. Arol had less interest in sparring than I, and nobody else was close to my still tiny size. I did manage to talk him into it every week or two, for an hour at least.

Da or Davlis would spar with me, but that was generally a matter of them holding a pikali in one hand, a mug of beer in the other and idly swinging my valiant efforts away with a flick of their wrists.

When the Iliaguard came through Delphin, we got the usual number of men making the short trek up to the smythy. Davlis pulled one of them aside, and for the price of a home-cooked meal, the man agreed to teach us some solid fundamentals.

His name was Seth Fortuny, and he was the Captain of Fortune Company. He said his name was just a matter of luck. He was about Da's age, and he spent an afternoon, alternately showing us how to kill each other, and patting our heads affectionately. He called Arol "Dumpling."

"Stand with your weight on your back leg, Olly. Don't let him knock you off your feet by taking out your front leg. Lead with your hook!" We were breathless and flustered trying to follow his advice, tripping

over each other even more than usual. “Dumpling! Guard your side after you stab, you could have been taken for a fool there.”

It was an exhausting afternoon in which we learned many new words. Not all of them were appreciated at dinner that evening.

Seth asked Arol, “Do you want to grow up to join the guard?”

“No, I just want to learn to swing a pikali better than Olly.”

Seth laughed. “And you, Olly, how in the name of all the stars will learning to swing a pikali benefit you?”

“Davlis says it will help learning how to make them in the forge. But I bet I could beat Arol with one.”

He laughed again. I liked Seth.

He joined us again for a meal. Sess, who believed herself to be a budding beauty, was quiet and blushing. Arol rolled his eyes at me from across the table, but Seth Fortuny was a wonder to us too; a near stranger, but almost a friend. He was gruffly friendly with Da and Davlis, but after dinner he favoured us with stories of his adventures on the road and the beauties and vastness of Ilia.

“The Sea Coast is as bright as diamonds, when the Mother Star shines, the water twinkles away to the horizon. When the wind blows, there are waves higher than your renowned temple, and when it storms, the sea is almost black, but the white sand still glows as if lit from below. At night, you can see the shore glowing from leagues out to sea. From there, you can haul fish as large as Davlis, but far more tasty.” He winked and we all laughed. “In the ports in Restitia, we have to watch our men carefully. Not a few have lost their hearts to the sea, and disappeared in the night to enlist on a sailing ship.”

Restitia was the western-most province in Ilia. It encompassed the entire coast and many miles inland. Between Restitia and our province of Behidia was Peria, the plains.

“Peria is flat, and it is dull but mostly uneventful to pass through. And its women are not flat, but they are bored to distraction, which the guard is always happy to provide.” He laughed at this, and Da and Davlis as well, if more briefly. I was lost in picturing a land with no trees or hills, where round women rolled about.

“Where are you from?” I blurted out.

“Peria!” he laughed. “My own Da was in the guard. He trained me from fifteen to be with him. I suppose I had a choice, but the guard was the only choice I cared to make. When I was sixteen, I was accepted as a trainee and I followed the guard out of town right into the Crown Wars.”

“We learned about the Crown Wars in school. Lots of people died,” said Arol. “Remember, Olly?” I remembered what Da had told me about the crown, not much else. I shrugged. Seth laughed at me.

A lot of people did die, in both Ilia and Coronado. I saw some of that myself,” he said sadly. “King Chantz won that war, but the cost... his father in battle, his brother through the gate. And the oval gate is still there, sucking endless people into its dark maw. So many seem powerless to resist its pull. I’ve seen it myself, with the throne room doors barred, they break in and throw themselves through it, all the while confessing to

the direst or the most minor of crimes.” He shook his head. “Yet the worst criminals, they fight being thrown through the gate as hard as they can. It makes no sense. I think that they are criminal in mind as well as criminal in action. They feel no remorse.”

“The crown is still gone,” said Arol.

“Aye,” Seth replied, “and so is the brother, but who knows but that the wars might start up again and we would have need of you, my young friend?”

“Not on my watch,” said Davlis.

In a complex system that had been taught in school, and that I dimly remembered, the membership of the guard ebbed and flowed. More flowed in during times of need. Trainees came in and served their minimum term, and then left, or they stayed. Many were lifelong guard. They could follow the companies as they flowed about the country, or lodge themselves in one place and hold the law there for months, or years, and then move on again. A few of the more permanent guard in towns had wed into the populace. Many stayed only four months and then picked up with the next company.

Being accepted into the guard was a simple matter of proving you could hoist a pikali and either best someone else, or come close to it. At the encampment outside of town, there were regular tryouts. Many in Delphin aspired to it and some were taken. During the Crown Wars, nearly everyone was taken, and many of them were lost to what seemed a senseless fight.

Something he said had stuck with me. “Fifteen? Why fifteen? I am not yet fourteen.”

Seth flushed slightly. “Well that was not quite right of me, but no matter as it’s all done now. It isn’t smiled upon to start training before fifteen. It can be dangerous, and you need to be alert and careful. Also, might as well give ’em a choice as to what they want to do, rather than shoving a pikali in their hands once they can stand.”

“No matter with you, Olly. You only need know enough of fighting to help your work in the forge. I doubt I will be taken to task for showing a child how not to trip over flat ground.”

I sat beside Seth, my head at the level of his elbow, and drew myself to my full height. “Da took me into the forge when I was really little. It’s all I ever wanted to do.”

“Took you in?” said Da. “As if I could keep you out. What would you say to a sleepover at the Inn with Tedd and Gregga? Seth, we would walk you back into town if you don’t mind the company.”

11

Da had long had the habit of visiting the Astrologers temple every few weeks. On rare nights, Arol and I would head to town with him and stay with Tedd and Gregga. Their ma, Sara, always tucked us in with a treat.

We slept in the family’s great room, three floors above the long bar of the Inn. The raucous voices and bursts of song were so far from the quiet in which I habitually slept at home, but there was a comfort in watching Sara, then Tedd and Gregga all slip easily into slumber with such a cacophony below them. It took

both Arol and then me some time to drift off and my dreams were filled with unfamiliar faces. My eyes opened and from the softening of the darkness, I could see that it was almost dawn. But that was not what had woken me.

I fought my way out of my bedding, confused to find myself in the loft of the Inn, rather than on my airy balcony. The rumble of voices below was still present, but the tone of it had changed from the raucous indulgence of a crowd to the focused shouting of a very few and a voice that I knew amidst them. I stumbled to the door and yanked it open. From the top of the winding stairs, I could see all the way down to the common room. All I could see was bodies pushing past each other.

Moving as if still in a dream, I grasped the railing and flung myself down the stairs, my feet barely touching the landings. I landed in bare feet on the dirty main floor and almost slid down into the puddles of spilled ale but I caught myself on a pole and raced out the door only to see the backs of a dozen men.

I dove between legs and under raised arms, and pushed my way to the front. There were two guard staggering over the stones in the pavement. My da was facing them; dancing back and forth to dodge their blows, but they kept tripping into him.

I darted forward to get myself between him and them, but I was one moment too late. One of the men drunkenly swung a pikali into the air, but the other tripped and fell into it, and it spun and hit my Da right in the center of his chest. A dark stain poured down his vest. Da's mouth opened in a scream, but the sound seemed to come from my own throat. I ran and I fell into him as he tumbled back onto the stones of the square. His eyes were clenched shut and he shook.

There were more people around me suddenly; Arol and there and Gavin from the Inn and Seth. There were hands that pulled and lifted and set us down on the steps of the temple, onto the portico that spanned the whole temple-front.

Somebody had lain down a pile of blankets, and on them, they lay my Da. Under the brightening sky, his face was white, drained, and strained. His eyes barely opened. "Da," I whispered.

He opened his eyes more fully and I felt myself pale at the depths of pain in them. He moved slightly, raised his hand. I quickly grasped it in both of mine; all four fingers on each of my hands wrapped about one of his. He involuntarily hissed but held on.

"Da!" my voice broke on the short word. "Da, why?"

"Olly..." his voice was scarcely more than a breath.

"There were some guard who tarried late in the square." I had no need to see her to know the voice; it was Catheryn, the astrologer. "Fermin was passing them, and they recognized him as Davlis's brother. They asked him to spar. He declined, they insisted. They were...inebriated. A finial was not tightly wound on a hook. He is sorely wounded." She knelt beside me, a clean bowl of water in her hands. She took a cloth from it, and softly wiped some spots from his face. He was splattered with mud. No, not mud. No. No. It was everywhere.

Davlis appeared at his other side, Junia beyond him, but she would not approach, I could sense her several feet away, standing, and shaking. Davlis stepped back to hold her.

“Ol...” Da’s voice was so soft. “You watch after Junie. She’ll need you.” He blurred in my vision, I wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my nightshirt. His eyes, dark as night, a mirror of my own, were blazing into mine. “My Olly. My star...” He reached his other hand to my face and brushed away wisps of my hair that had come loose from my cap. His lips curled in a smile. “Do you never take that thing off?” He asked.

I managed a laugh through my tears. I wiped them away again. “Not that I remember.”

He softly pulled my face closer to his. His eyes filled my world. “Live how you will live. Love who you would love. Remember me, Olly. Remember your Da loved you.”

“Da!” My vision blurred. When it cleared, he was no longer looking at me, but up into the stars. The stardust inside my Da was gone.

I had been taught since young that when someone dies, the heart of the world shifts its center so that we can either return to the place from where our ancestors emerged, or choose to be free. I leant over Da, feeling the great heart of the world settle onto him, over us both. I knew that I should stand and help to fling his stardust to the four directions so that all that he ever was could be freed to new happiness. Either comforted forever under the mysterious rays of the distant Father Star or someday reborn into our world, or perhaps another. I knew this and I tried, but I could not stand. I felt Catheryn over us, making the movements, saying the words, and all I could do was cling to his chest and hope that he was becoming free. But he was taking too much happiness with him.

12

There were other moments that day that I recall.

Junia confused and crying softly. Davlis holding us on the steps. Catheryn trembling as she directed her helpers to bring Da’s body into the temple. The market square coming to life, because against all sense, against all reason, it was a market day. Bafflingly, time had not ceased passing.

We were somehow back at the forge, and Mara was pulling my nightshirt off my back and pouring warm water over me.

There was food in front of me from time to time. It smelled like bloodied blankets.

Seth Fortuny, his helmet under his arm, talked to Davlis. Two men from his company had disappeared, their bodies washing up downriver in the late afternoon. It was not known if they had taken their own lives, or if others had pushed them in. I never knew their names. I never knew whether I forgave them or not, or if there was anything to forgive. The stars whirl, they choose their dance partners and our own, and then they whisk them away. My Da was loved. If I never did find it in myself to mourn their deaths, neither did I celebrate them.

At night, I was dosed with sleeping petals. I spat them into the fire.

Past midnight, I rose and scratched a note with charcoal. I left it on the table. Sess had laid out my good clothes. I took them outside and dressed in the dark. I gathered wild flowers into a posy as I walked down the river path.

I stood boldly at the main door of the temple and rattled the chains on them until Catheryn of Kelvia came to open them. She and I would have words someday, but today, I had no heart for it.

The temple was largest building in Delphin, in the whole province of Behidia. The grand doors I opened into an even grander wide, open hall, surrounded by square pillars, which rose to carved capitals. Above these, the four walls leaned in to form a pyramid, which was topped with a polished glass lens to let in the starlight. In front of each pillar hung an iron lamp, the light reflecting against the pale grey Callan stone.

The central altar was ten feet long, and three feet wide and high. Its sides were elaborately carved, depicting coiling vines, patterns of stars, and warriors wielding pikalia. The top of altar was covered in flowers, vines, and bundles of grass, heads heavy with seed. In the center of all this abundance lay my Da. His long, dark hair flowed around his shoulders. He wore a sea green coat with polished shell buttons. The one I wore was nearly identical, I had begged for it. I saw there was a stool beside the altar. I looked to Catheryn and she nodded.

I climbed up on it, sat, and gazed down on his face. I laid the little posy I had made beside his head. After a time, I bent over and laid my face against his heart and wrapped my arms about him.

I don't know when I started talking, but I told him of my day, of Junia, of how I cheated in school, and how I was angry at the Mother Star for taking him back to the Father Star, and what I thought of my new canvas boots. I poured all the words that I had into him, for I knew this was my last chance. My tears flowed onto his chest. My words flowed into the uncaring stone.

Catheryn stood beside me most of the night, whispering soothing sounds and stroking my back.

I woke slumped over him, my arms still about his chest.

It was morning and people were arriving. Too many faces, too many comforting voices. Davlis, Arol, Junia and Sess arrived. They joined me on the platform. Every time a member of the Guard passed, they saluted us again and I felt the gesture tear my life apart.

There were words, endless words, from Cathryn and Jimador, her new apprentice. Jimador had been Jimi when he was younger, and had taken even the youngest of us to capture wild ponies across the river. To train as an astrologer, he had gone all the way to Iliasa, the royal seat of Ilia. I let their words wash over me and stared down at my Da. This, I will remember.

Arms, and I don't know whose, pulled me away from his side, and I trailed my fingers through his hair for the last time. I was placed onto a bench.

Jimi and Catheryn each walked to a pillar on either side of the temple. Set into the pillars were panels with knobs and dials, levers and keyholes. Catheryn inserted a key from around her neck. Each lever controlled assorted pullies and chains, all of which ran up to brackets surrounding the lens at the top of the pyramidal

ceiling. As they cranked and pulled, curved lenses and mirrors folded down from around the cavity of the lens. They lowered each one and then rotated it to some precise angle. Catheryn walked back to the center of the altar, and gazed up to see their work. She nodded, and Jimi withdrew.

Catheryn joined us on our bench. She even sat between Junia and me, holding our hands. This was a high honour for both of us.

We sat. We waited. The temple brightened. Then brightened further.

“Do not look up. Look only at your father,” said Catheryn.

The lens and the mirrors were made from the crystalline sands that glowed all night on the Ilian shore in Restitia. Each grain of sand was imbued with the loving energy of the Mother Star. Ilian lenses contain that shimmering, beautiful light and their power and clarity are unmatched in the world. The astrologers say that the distilled scrap of the Mother Star in each lens magnifies the glow of the stardust within us.

The whole temple glowed more brilliantly every second as The Mother Star shone through the lens and her light was reflected in the mirrors, down into the temple.

Then she rose to the necessary height in the sky. Each mirror caught her rays, reflected from the giant lens, and focused them down onto the altar. Nine brilliant piercing rays of light hit Da at the same time. He glowed momentarily, and then burst into intense, searing flame. He burnt for all of thirty seconds, sucking most of the air out of the room, with an audible “whoof”. This too, I would remember, the last bizarre sound that my Da made in this world.

The brilliant rays of light faded quickly, and as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. There was almost nothing left on the altar, only a few scraps of ash and fluttering petals.

Catheryn squeezed our hands and rose. She stepped onto the platform surrounding the altar. Her voice was shaky but regaining its smooth surety.

“The Father Star will be welcoming him back. He will feel great joy to have such a one back in his fold. Leave your pain here, but keep Fermin forever in your hearts.” The traditional words had to be spoken, but they sounded hollow and inappropriate.

She walked us to the door. She held Davlis’ hands and looked into his eyes. He met her gaze as an equal. I think they understood each other, those two. She put a hand on the shoulders of Arol and Sess for a long moment. Then she pulled Junia and me into her embrace and held us.

“He was the best man I ever knew,” she said, and I could feel her tears fall on my forehead.

Catheryn had been the Astrologer of Delphin Temple for sixteen years. She was originally from the coastal city of Kelvia, south of the royal city. She had requested this posting, saying she had been drawn here by the stars, and would remain until the stars pulled her elsewhere. For all that Delphin had a wonderful temple, and lay in the foothills of the Callus Mountains, closer to the stars than most places in the country, it was still a small and lonely hinterland for anyone used to a big city. Catheryn was renowned as one of the finest

astrologers to ever serve in this or any temple. She had advised the astrologers of the king. I heard that she advised them still from afar.

She was also our mother.

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I had heard many times the tale of how Catheryn had come to Delphin and my Da had been instantly smitten by her golden hair and skin. She was ten years older than he, and sworn to the astrologer's temple. That is a discipline that leaves little time for anything else, but that did not stop them from spending what free time she had in each other's company.

When Junia was born, Catheryn handed her to my Da and bade him find a nurse. When Junia was two, and I was on my way, it was already apparent that Junia wasn't flourishing like the healthy stock of the hills usually did. She was content to play with a ragdoll and sit in a corner, mumbling and crooning.

Mara had let slip to me once that it was Junia's endless crooning that had made Davlis's wife half mad, and it was partly why she left him with two children of his own to tend to. When I was a babe, Junia briefly cast aside her ragdoll and clung to my side, petting me like a puppy. She learned to wave bottles at anyone when she thought I was hungry and she tucked me in at night. Soon enough, it was me tucking her in and making sure she was fed. The first word Junia said was "Olly." The second was "Da."

Da had been a big man, and I heard women call him handsome. But he stayed loyal to Catheryn, and they had always managed to spend a few nights a month together. Then he would come home to us.

Now, he did not come home at all and I felt broken. Everywhere I looked, there was something missing: in the forge, at the dinner table, on the walk into town. I had not been back in the woods. I had barely looked into my own heart. When I had tried, a great rattling emptiness had looked back.

Not that my days were empty, they were, if anything, overly full. I had thought that Davlis would let me leave school, but he did not even let me finish the question. "Your da told me six years, you will stay at least your six years. NOT another word, Olly." He cut off my protests unheard. I gritted my teeth through those last few weeks.

Years before, Arol had devised an ingenious system of writing my tests for me, or providing me with answers I did not even remotely understand, but those final tests in school were more closely monitored. I passed them all. If but by the barest of whispers, pass, I did.