

**It is the Dark Ages. A Dying Sun Sets in the West. Man Becomes Shadow.
Out of this Sunless Land Will Rise a Legend...
Of the Starborn Child,
Of the Great Cosmic War,
Of the Sword of Power...**

SWORD FROM THE SKY BY R. JANVIER DEL VALLE

Reviewers are **RAVING** about *Sword from the Sky*:

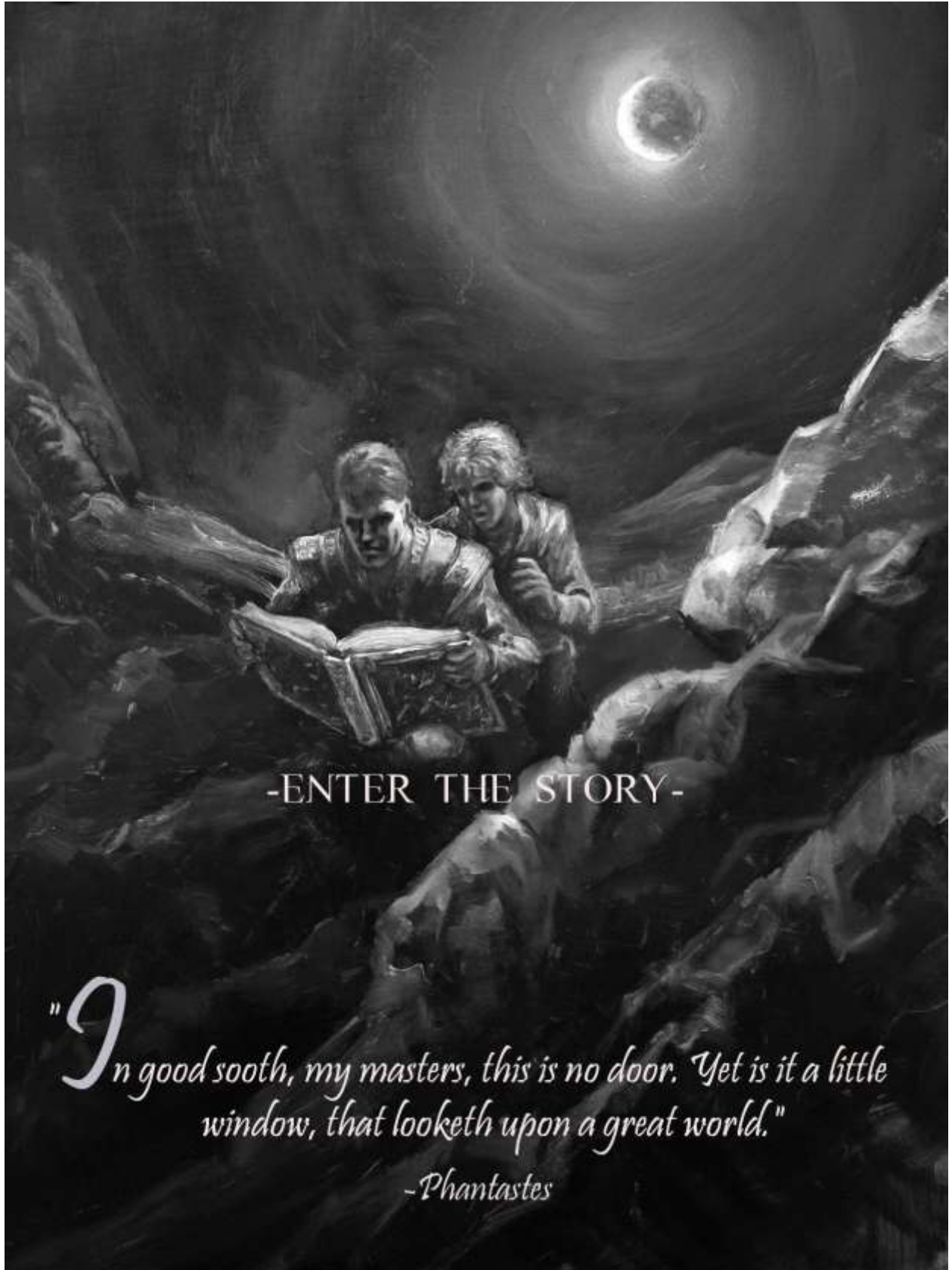
--"There is much I could say about this book that would take up a lot of space!"

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--"Sword from the Sky successfully pulled me in with a good plot and well developed characters."

--"Wow!! I was so captivated in just a few pages that I read the book in one day!"

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-ENTER THE STORY-

"In good sooth, my masters, this is no door. Yet is it a little window, that looketh upon a great world."

-Phantastes

SWORD FROM THE SKY

(BOOK I: THE BLADE SCHOOL OF DAVÍ)



BY
R. JANVIER DEL VALLE

Copyedited by Claudette Cruz
Cover Art by Ronald Calica
Frontispiece by Jason Cheeseman-Meyer

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

-Matt 5:13

Sword from the Sky
Book I: The Blade School of Daví
By R. Janvier del Valle

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Book One: The Blade School of Daví

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THE DEAF SWORDSMAN SERIES (NOVELLAS)

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No. 6: The Golden Queen (TBA 2014)

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No. 8: The Hound of the Moon (TBA 2014)

No. 9: Escape from the Sunless Land (TBA 2014)

SILAS DE SAN MICHEL MYSTERIES (NOVELS)

To Kill and Kill Again (Q1/2014)

*Star is the noble sign of the soul,
and though nobly bright,
must by law rise and fall with the sky.
Thus the soul must by law rightly do the same.*

*This is known as revealed from hence on;
which prevails as truth in our hearts,
I, who was Druuk of Hads, being the scribe of Daví
while it came to be known in our time.*

-In the Sixth Epoch of Fire, in the Age of the Moon Ire.

Prologue

A *SHOOTING STAR* leaped across the purple horizon, seemingly racing down towards the bosom of an embracing dawn. The beauty of the cosmos flared in the distance, and the air swam in a mist of cold rain. Moments later, upon a great hill, a hound made its presence known. He was tall and slender, yet muscular, with a deep chest, something akin to a cheetah's body, as if he was made to run. The creature had large eyes and drop ears on a long and narrow head. His dark mane contrasted with his bright blue eyes, luminous and eternal. The hound sat under the backdrop of an early sunrise, staring intensely at the barren land.

Weary of the terrain, the hound stood idly, discerning the ominous landscape with his transcending spirit. The wet grass adorning the moors was of a bluish gray, as if it was painted over by the night sky. Dawn was settling far in the distance, yet most of the sky was dark. The only light came from a sullen moon, which hovered close to the ground, and some curious fireflies that fluttered amongst the grass, exploring the beauty of their world.

Without hesitating any longer, the hound took off running down the hill and into a large grassy field, racing across the horizon, on his way towards a large and dark forest. Upon reaching the wooded area, he stopped and hesitated before breaking into its borders. He surveyed the tall trees. They were all intertwined and entangled with each other, as if wrestling in an eternal embrace. His ears perked up, searching the chorus of noises emanating from the dense patches of shadow. At first, he only heard the sound of various nightly critters, but as he concentrated a little longer, in the middle of all the noise, the hound discovered what he longed for: the cries of a newborn baby boy.

And just then, a booming voice echoed across the moonlit sky. *I have appointed you for this task. Guard the boy with your life. The sunless land grows stronger by the hour. Time is now but a fleeting moment. Go now, Umbrador, and fulfill your destiny.*

Onward the hound went, dashing along the dimly lit wooded trails, honing his nose on that which it sought, straight into the heart of the darkened forest.

A Late Start

TWELVE YEARS LATER

“AH!” the woman screamed as she threw the blankets up to the ceiling.

Simultaneously, twelve-year old Luca shared in her fright. “AH!” he also screamed, losing his balance and falling on the floor, for Luca had only one good leg, his right one to be exact. His left leg had been crushed right after he came out his mother’s womb and had been amputated just below the knee.

“Oh my heavens, poor child!” Sertu said, running towards him. Sertu towered over the average man, but she was as nurturing as a mother bear is to her cubs. She grabbed his hand and picked him up off the floor. “Why are you still here, Master Luca? You’re going to be late for the parade!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Sertu,” Luca said, wiping away the dark strands of hair from his eyes. “I was looking outside and I noticed that my roosters were gone. They were supposed to wake me up, but now they’re gone.”

“Oh dear, quite right,” Sertu said with a guilty look on her face.

“Do you know what happened to them?”

“Um,” Sertu stuttered as she stalled for some answers. “Well, it’s an important day, you know, and I think...I mean I might...it’s quite possible that they’ve found their way into—”

“Into what?” Luca said.

“Well, into a pot—they might have made their way into a stew, that is...for a party. I mean,

for your party, a feast—a celebration, that is. Today is a great day! Yes, today is a great day, and you're late for it, Master Luca. We need to get you ready. Come on." Sertu picked up the blankets and went through his wardrobe for his things.

"Into a pot?" Luca said. "Oh, that's terrible, no? I mean, poor birds."

"Master Luca," Sertu said as she threw a shirt at him, which landed on his head. "Please focus."

Luca tried desperately to put on his shirt while hopping on his one good leg. Sertu kept throwing various garments at him.

"What is it exactly that you're supposed to wear to these things?" Sertu said while holding two types of pants in each hand.

As he hopped around the room with a number of garments covering his head, Luca blindly pointed to one of the pair of pants in her oversized grip.

"All right then," Sertu said, placing the pants on the bed and turning around to reach for his sandals. It wasn't long before she heard a big *thud* and noticed that Luca had tripped over his bed as he hopped around the room.

"Oh, dear, not again," she said. She walked over to Luca, helping him onto his bed. She took all the clothes that she had unwillingly toppled on his head and threw them on the floor.

"I think it might be better if I did this by myself, Miss Sertu."

Sertu folded her hands below her waist, and with a sad look apologized to Luca. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm nervous, that's all. I just want you to do well."

"I know, Miss Sertu," Luca said, understanding her sentiments. "It'll be all right, I promise—on my wooden leg, I promise."

"Oh, well, that's sweet," Sertu said as she gave him a big hug.

Like most kids, Luca was not fond of hugs, especially from adults. "Ugh," he said in a disapproving manner.

"Well, just hurry up, little master," Sertu said. "I'll be outside if you need me."

Sertu exited the room, and closing the door behind her, left Luca to be by himself. After all, Luca was in for a big day, and it would do him well to have some quiet time to think and prepare for his upcoming trials. He hummed a tune while he finished getting dressed.

Luca lived with his father, Druuk. Their manor was situated a few miles from the walls of the palace. As the second prince, that is, the second oldest son of the king, Druuk was not allowed to

reside inside palace walls. That honor was only bestowed to the king, the first prince, and any of their immediate families and staff. Yet, Druuk had complete access to the palace at all times, and because he was still a prince, all reverence was given to him by the people of Bune, for it was his birthright.

As his son, Luca was also given certain privileges, such as being able to access the palace and enjoy some of its comforts, regardless of the fact that the king had never recognized young Luca as his legitimate grandson, for the king believed that Luca's mom, Evie, was nothing but a harlot who fancied herself as nobility. This tension between Druuk and the king had always bothered Luca, and he always blamed himself for the rift, although he kept this deep in his thoughts and made sure never to reveal it to his father.

That morning Luca did the same as all other mornings, which was to neatly place his clothes side by side on his bed and get dressed in an orderly manner; he always liked to be precise. After laying his things on the bed, he sat down beside them and took off his night garments. But before he could put on his training pants, he needed to secure the wooden leg onto his own.

Because of his status as a prince, he'd had access to the greatest craftsmen, and after some time, they were able to forge a durable and effective wooden leg made from the strongest of trees. As he grew older every year, a new one was made to compensate for his growth. The one he put on that day was especially made for him by his father's good friend, Vohro.

Vohro had been fond of Luca since the moment the little prince had been born and made sure to protect and care for him as if he was his own son. Yet, Vohro also had a son, whom he named Vehru, and Vohro loved his son more than anything. He made great efforts to keep Luca at Vehru's side so they could grow up to be good friends like he and Druuk were, and to watch out for each other, for one day they would have to do without the guidance of their parents.

This superior wooden leg that Vohro crafted for Luca was forged in a way as to be resistant to physical force and stress, so it was fitting for Luca to use it whenever he was required to perform physical feats or put great strain on the leg, especially when he trained with his blades. This wooden leg he was about to put on would be a great asset in helping him obtain his final blade.

For you see, Luca was a Davinian, that is, he was a member of the prestigious Blade School of Daví, a thousand-year-old school known for its legendary swordsmen. It was customary for all children of nobility to attend the school and learn all seven levels of blade mastery. Yet, due to his disability, Luca was initially denied entrance, for it was believed that he would not have the

ability to perform all the movements needed to become a Davinian master. But at last, Prince Druuk was able to persuade the Davinian masters to take in Luca for training on a trial basis, and he was admitted to the Blade School of Daví at the age of six to learn basic movements and concepts.

Surprisingly, after the first year, the masters witnessed a fire in Luca that existed in no other student, and though it came with great difficulty, Luca quickly learned all the movements needed to handle being a Davinian apprentice. He was not quick on his footwork, but to offset that, he became proficient with his upper body. He learned how to create a great center of balance, even with his disability. And his techniques, his slashing and counters, were all up to par and sometimes even surpassed others. Would he ever become a great master? Probably not, but the determination that bred inside Luca garnered him respect from the masters and also empowered his spirit, enabling Luca to advance from level to level. It wasn't long before Luca had earned all six of his lower blades and was ready to test for his final blade, his long sword, which all students must acquire before being recognized as a Davinian "Servantu," a master of blades.

Luca grabbed the wooden limb and hooked it onto his leg, and where it met his own, he wrapped a strong and flexible adhesive bandage to secure it nice and tight. He put a thin, yet durable, metal brace around the area and snapped it shut. This part always brought him discomfort, and that day was no exception; he gave a pained sigh.

The last thing he wrapped around his leg was a long leather strap. His father had always told him the leather strap had belonged to his mother, and Luca found the leather strap to be comforting when secured around his leg, as if he was constantly in his mother's embrace, even if it was just his leg. Luca had never been fond of hugs, but a hug from his mother would've been something he would have truly welcomed, for Luca never knew his mother; she died during childbirth, when she and Druuk were attacked by a horrendous beast.

He took the strap, which measured about four feet in length, and starting from one end to the other, wrapped it around where the wooden leg met his own.

"When all is done and you run it through—all five toes you'll have—and round and round it goes—and if it makes you cry you'll know—soon those tears will dry because—you will have all you wished for—as you lay dreaming dear boy—for now you have a foot to call your own—and all five toes you'll have," he quietly sung as he wrapped the strap around his leg.

Finished, Luca closed his eyes and sat there in silence. He always liked those quiet moments

to himself, especially when thinking about his mother.

After he finished dressing, there was only one thing left to put on, the thing that he always looked forward to every morning, the thing he always wore with great disbelief: his Davinian vest. The sun had been hitting it all morning, and the leather was warm to the touch as he grabbed it and put it on.

His six Davinian blades were in a long wooden case atop his night desk. The case had a carving on top that told a story, one of a heroic warrior who led great armies against the evil king. It was a fable his father used to tell him over and over when he was just beginning to comprehend stories. He'd always been fond of that one. Luca opened the case, and the steel breathed with life, all six of them, and when Luca picked them up, he could hear the songs in their teeth.

One by one, he took each blade and put them in their appropriate slot in the vest: two on his back, two on his chest, and two on his belt resting on his hips. The one that was missing, his long sword—an empty sheath awaited it on the middle of his back.

After all the blades were perfectly snug in his vest, he grabbed his *Davinian Ren*, which was a shorter, sleeveless version of the traditional Davinian robe, and his soft, wide-brimmed hat, and made his way towards the door. But before leaving, he stopped and stared at a drawing hanging up on the wall next to the door. It was a drawing of his mother that his father drew of her a long time ago. She was dressed in silver, and her long, curly hair was of the fairest color. Her eyes sparkled like two stars, while her cheeks were the color of the sun's kisses, and she sat along the bank of a river, with her feet splashing on the clear waters. Druuk always made it known to Luca that his mother had fancied the things of nature—she loved, as Druuk put it, the “act of breathing.”

Luca reached for the drawing and took it. He rolled it up and placed it inside his pants pocket. He left to start his perfect day.

Stepping out of the manor, he ran to the front gate, where his carriage stood waiting. The day was radiantly lit up by the sun, and the sky was clear of any blemish. The wind was whistling the softest anthem, and the air was crisp and clean. Luca enjoyed every ounce of his breaths.

All three of the manor's housemaids waited outside to bid him well. Sertu approached Luca with a small bag. “Here are some things to nibble on while you make your way down to the school,” she said. “I know it's a long ride.”

“Thanks for that,” Luca said, grabbing the bag.

“Oh, boy, you know it’s my job to keep you fed,” Sertu said, knowing she did it because she loved him.

Luca smiled first at Sertu but suddenly turned serious. “Oh...”

“What’s the matter, Master Luca?” Sertu said.

“I forgot—”

“Forgot what? What!” Sertu said.

“I forgot to give you a hug,” Luca replied sweetly as he put his arms around Sertu, knowing that she was fond of hugs.

“Oh, you—stop it!” Sertu said. “Now go on, you’re already extremely late. Hurry up and come back so we can celebrate!”

That day *was* a perfect day for a celebration, and Luca rushed up to the open-air carriage, climbing inside. Luca’s driver was asleep—at least, he pretended to be.

“Gertred,” Luca said. “I’m ready.”

But the driver kept still; he was funny that way, always playing practical jokes on Luca.

“Gertred, we need to get a move on it,” Luca said as Gertred kept his eyes closed, smiling. Luca reached inside his ren and gently brushed the handle of the blade on his right chest, and it made a soft, yet clear sound, splitting the wind in two. “Would you like another haircut, Gertred?”

And as he said this, Gertred snapped forward, quickly displaying a fullness of life. “Sorry, Master Luca,” Gertred said. “I was only messing with the master. Please forgive me. I thought you might like a good laugh this morning, seeing you’re late and all.”

“Don’t apologize, I’m just nervous,” Luca said. “But I appreciate the gesture. Now, if it’s no trouble, Gertred, please do your best to get us to the procession line as fast as possible.”

“As you command, young master,” Gertred said, tugging at the horses’ reins. “Go on! You heard the master!” And with Gertred’s yell came a roar from the horses as they sped out and made their way down the road, spitting up dirt and grass in the air while Sertu and the other maids waved them goodbye.

Luca sped off in his carriage, on his way to the annual “Spadas” celebration, or “testing of blades,” ready to embrace his destiny and compete for the final rite that would make him a Master of Daví. The Spadas parade was about to begin, as all of the students from the provinces

of Esterra had arrived from their long journeys, lining up along the entrance to “Ave’s Path.” The Blade School of Daví was situated at the end of this great mile-long road, and as an annual event, the Spadas parade drew large crowds, and all manner of life ceased to be, if only to accommodate this important and joyful occasion.

After some time, Luca’s carriage disappeared into the horizon on its way down the long path that cut through the hills of the barren moors. The path went down a few miles, leading to the lowlands where Ave’s Path was located. Luca flirted with the wind, and it forced all the strands of hairs on his head to flop in every direction imaginable, and in the midst of all this chaos, he managed to peek through the dark strands engulfing his vision. He saw Ave’s Path situated just below the hills about a mile away from them. He noticed a dance of collective nervousness, like a multitude of ants readying themselves for war. The vision of this communion between warriors gave him a yearning to join in the fellowship with the students; he was eager to be part of this utopian chaos.

The massive line of students and carriages were consumed by a spectrum of colors. Glimmering in the sun, with all shapes and sizes, varying in materials and quality, the students’ formal wear exhibited the colors of their homelands, the provinces. It was a sharp contrast to the bleak moors that cradled the lengthy procession line; anemic they were, as if all matter of sustainable life had broken down and deteriorated the many cells that made up the life source of the sloping moors.

Though, this was not the case when it came to the moors that embraced the southern part of the kingdom of Bune. The northern lands, where the palace and school resided, were like an evil twin to the south’s enchanting canvas of green pastures and crystalline rocks. But this northern land Luca called home, and as long as the sun stood above the land and showered him with its majestic warmth, he was satisfied with the flaws of his kingdom, a beauty he once called a *dreary romance*.

The Spadas was a time for merrymaking and profit earning. The Bunish people would set up camps and shops along Ave’s Path, peddling their goods and trades to the hundreds of people that had traveled from all across the land to enjoy the splendor of the annual ceremony and to cheer on their native students.

In Esterra, there existed a number of provinces. A province was considered a region of Esterra known to entertain a certain culture and lifestyle that was particular to that part of the

land. Each province had its own commonwealth or body politic, and all provinces worked together in the overall ruling of Esterra.

Only two of the provinces were of noble status, the Royal Province of Bune, which covered the southern region of Esterra and housed the Blade School of Daví, and the Royal Province of Corco, a massive, imperial-like city which made its home in the northern region. All other provinces were referred to as the *noble commons*, meaning they were respected by the noble provinces though they were of common status.

It was customary for the provinces to cheer on a Davinian student during the annual Spadas. Students from all over looked forward to the chance of advancing in the levels of blade mastery, especially Luca. He had dreamt of this day ever since he joined the Davinian Order.

Luca and his carriage neared the procession line with about half a mile still to go. As Luca began to prepare his things, he sensed an uneasy feeling creeping up behind him, something that, all of a sudden, terrorized his inner senses. He turned to the northern horizon, to the farthest peaks of the Bellowing Mountains, and he saw a dark lining slowly overtaking the slopes of the forest-infested terrain, and for the first time that day, he felt insignificant, like a pestering bug ready to be smashed into oblivion.

“Oh, look, Master Luca,” Gertred said as he pointed down towards the mass of people heading towards the parade. “The ones in silver, they must have come from Corco.”

Luca’s focus was broken, and the feeling that he’d had just seconds before quickly abandoned him. He turned to the people down below and stared in amazement. “I see them,” he said. “They must have traveled for weeks, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yes, Master Luca,” Gertred said. “Just the journey across the Bellowing Mountains must have taken them at least a week, and that’s without sleep.”

“Look at those,” Luca said, pointing to a mass of people holding a huge flag of purple and white colors. “Where do you think they’re from?”

“If my mind serves me right, I believe they’re from the woodland realm of Janvai,” Gertred said. “Master Luca, that’s where the young Mister Jenóu hails from.”

“I didn’t forget,” Luca said. “He’s the youngest ever to become a seventh-blade.”

How could Luca forget? He had admired Jené Jenóu for some time now, for he was extremely fast with his blades, something Luca always strove for. But he never could remember where Jené was from. “Janvai,” Luca said with wonder. “Hurry up, Gertred.”

“I’m trying my best, but I have to keep you safe as well.”

The carriage hurried down the last sloping path on its way to the procession line. As it approached a hard turn around a corner, Gertred spotted a large object lying on the side of the path. “Master Luca, do you see that?”

“It looks like a carriage of some sort,” Luca said.

It appeared that some peasants had suffered an accident with one of their wheels as they were making their way down to the parade; it had completely torn off from the rest of the carriage. From what Luca could discern, there were two families, each with young kids, and the men were desperately trying to fix the wheel but failing miserably.

“Should we stop?” Gertred said. “After all, it *is* your duty as a Davinian.”

Luca pondered it over, and knowing that he was late for the procession, made a hasty decision. “Keep going,” he said. “We’re already extremely late as it is.”

“Are you sure?” Gertred said as if he was giving him another opportunity.

“Yes, Gertred,” reiterated Luca. “Please, heed my wishes.”

“Will do, young master.” Gertred sped around the corner, leaving the peasants to deal with their own misfortune. A few seconds hadn’t passed before Luca began to feel smothered, and a feeling shot into his soul, drilling into it like someone taking a screw to his heart and burying it deep inside. He had thought he’d made the right decision, at least for his sake, so why was his inner being preaching the contrary?

Luca turned to look back at the peasants, but they had already disappeared from his view. Riding down the pathway for a minute or so, they reached a corner akin to the one they had just passed, and after they made the turn, Luca noticed another carriage in distress. But how could this be? Was this a second chance, perhaps? So Luca acted without thought.

“Gertred,” Luca said, raising himself to a standing position. “Look there—another carriage. We can help this one. Halt now.”

Gertred spotted the wreck, yet he was wary. It was strange for them to come up on a second carriage just mere seconds after passing the first one. “Are you sure, Master Luca?”

“Gertred, you sure are quick to question me today.”

“I’ll do as you say, then.” Gertred pulled the carriage to the side and stopped a few yards away from the other carriage.

This second carriage was almost identical to the first one they had passed, but it was slightly

different in an odd way. It looked like it was hastily put together and poorly constructed. One of the carriage's wheels, in fact, the same one that had torn off the first carriage, the left rear wheel, was torn apart from it.

There were two families standing by the carriage, just like there was with the first one, and they appeared to be standing in the same spots as the others before them. But these families were abnormal in a sense, for they were well groomed, sort of too perfect to be heading out for a daylong celebration. Also, it seemed that the family members, the mothers, daughters, sons and fathers, did not resemble each other; they did not appear as a blood-related brood. The kids had flaming red hair, but the parents' hair was dark, with black mounds of wavy locks. And they all appeared ghostly and white, as if too much white makeup had been applied on their faces and limbs.

Luca jumped off his ride and made his approach. The people did not move much but just stared at the young Davinian as he walked over to them, and before Luca could ask them if they needed assistance, one of the men yelled out "YES" in an erratic manner and flashed a crooked smile. The rest of the family abruptly grinned in unison, as if they were forced to be amicable.

"Do you need help?" Luca said. "It looks like you do. Did you say *yes*? Did you say I could help you?" But they did not respond. Luca turned to Gertred, and the loyal servant gave the young warrior a suspicious look and shrugged his shoulders as if to say "I don't know."

Luca turned back to the man, stepping closer to him. "You're all well dressed for a casual ceremony," Luca said. "Is there something special you're looking forward to?" There was no answer from them. "Where do you hail from?"

Finally, one of the men pointed to the horizon, just beyond the Bellowing Mountains.

"You come from the mountains?" Luca said. Yet again, there was no answer. "I guess that makes sense, for if you were from these lands, you would recognize me as prince."

"We know you are a prince," one of the children said, "but a prince of what?"

After an awkward, silent pause, Luca decided to quickly fix the wheel. "Well, I'm late for the procession," Luca said. "I must tend to your carriage."

Luca turned away from them, grabbed the detached wheel, and brought it over to the carriage, where he knelt down to inspect the damage. "Well, that's strange," Luca said. "There's no sign of damage on the axle here, but the wheel is smashed for no apparent reason, it seems."

At that moment, something made Luca turn his head to the horizon, and he saw a darkness

creeping down the mountains in the distance. He lowered his head and looked at both his forearms; they were inundated with goosebumps. His back suddenly arched, as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice onto his fresh skin. *Why am I feeling like this?* He turned his head to his left and noticed that one of the men had come up close on him, and Luca looked to his feet. The man had on sandals, and when Luca got a closer look at his toes, he noticed they were decayed.

Luca stood up and turned to the man, who now sported a forced smile. “I need to get my tools from the carriage,” he said, backing away from the man, keeping an eye on the rest of the group.

When he reached the carriage, he made like he was fumbling with his things in one of the storage trunks. “Gertred, look lively,” whispered Luca. “We’re breaking away on my signal.”

“Understood, my prince,” the driver replied. He need not ask as to Luca’s motives; he already knew the reason.

Without giving it anymore thought, Luca made a motion that took him up in the air, landing securely in his carriage; he was a Davinian warrior, after all. He knew swiftness, yet he did not want to meddle in dark things, so he made the decision not to create any conflict with the strange families before him.

“Where are you going, prince?” the pale-faced man said.

“Come with us, prince,” the child said whose hair was fire.

“Now, Gertred!” Luca said.

Gertred flipped his wrists with precision, and the reins of the carriage tapped onto the horses’ backs, and they were off like a runaway carriage speeding down the path, with Luca and Gertred never looking back. It took them no longer than three minutes to make up the rest of the mile they had left before reaching the procession line, and both Luca and Gertred had never been so relieved, yet this only lasted for a small moment, for Luca quickly found out that being late to the tournament’s procession line was not a permissible matter. There were a number of Davinian guards mounted on horses riding up and down the line, making sure that no student was to sneak in under their noses.

Luca noticed his friend Vehru sitting in the carriage belonging to the Royal Province of Bune, and beside Vehru, an empty space awaited him—but he was not the only one to notice. Just as he took his eyes away from his friend, Luca spotted one of the guards riding up to the carriage, possibly to inquire about the empty space. And if things couldn’t have gotten any worse, Vehru,

who had not noticed the guard coming upon him, raised his arm and waved to Luca.

“This is going to be harder than I thought,” Luca said with a big sigh.

Yet, a reprimand from one of the Davinian guards paled in comparison to what he had experienced on the path down the moorish hills. Luca turned to the horizon one last time, and he felt that the day might ultimately take a turn for the worse.

Miles away from Luca, up near the Bellowing Mountains, on top of the highest mountain peak overlooking the Bunish moors, there was a darkness that covered the ground. Onto this ground stepped some horses—three, to be exact, and sitting upon them were three riders, one with white hair, the other with red, and the last with solid black. They stared out into the distance, overlooking the parade of students and the peoples of Esterra. The men stood breathing in an irregular manner, as if each breath were forced. They waited silently, for it was not their time.

But before the three could retreat back into the darkness in which they came from, a dark rider crept up behind them, forcing the three to split apart, letting the presence through to the front. The rider was smaller than the rest, and he sat on a black horse and wore a blood-red cloak, and underneath the cloak, the rider wore an armor of the same color, but magnificently glimmering in contrast to the cloak. The hood of the cloak covered most of the rider’s armored helm except for one small part, the armored plate that covered the mouth area.

The armored plate was elaborately painted with a drawing of a mouth with closed lips, but in a matter of seconds, the plate flipped, disappearing to the left, and from the right, another painted plate appeared in its stead, one with a drawing of an open mouth showing off a pair of saber teeth covered in blood and spit.

The rider reached inside his cloak and pulled out a medium-sized bag that seemed to have been moving, as if it bound something inside it. The rider pulled the bag up near its head. “Bring him to us,” the rider in red said, and he untied the top of the bag, releasing its content onto the ground. It was a creature of some sort. As it fell to the ground, the small beast was quickly consumed by the tall blades of grass, and it speedily made its way towards the festivities down below.

Down the Two Paths

“WHAT WERE YOU WAVING AT, YOUNG SIR?” the Davinian official said.

The young student, who was shy in nature but had the built of an adolescent athlete, turned to the official and pondered on the matter. As calmly as his father would act on any given day, he explained himself.

“I was looking at the sun,” Vehru said. “It has become quite whimsical this morning, but the birds seem to be in full flight, so I made friends with the wind.”

Now, Vehru knew he had just spoken nonsense, but the official did not, and therefore a cloud of confusion rained down on the official’s head, and to fully save himself from any humiliation, he avoided the subject altogether and spoke of something else.

“Rightly so,” the official said. He noticed the empty space next to Vehru and spoke of it. “And who is to be sitting next to you?”

“I’ll know only when he gets here,” Vehru said.

“He?”

“Or she.”

“I see,” the official said. “Well, it would seem best for me to wait here and see who ends up stealing that seat, for this person, whoever he is, is extremely late, and it seems only fair to subtract points from that student’s examination, if, of course, that student is to be tested today.”

“Yes, that would seem best,” Vehru said, knowing it actually didn’t seem so good for Luca.

Back at Luca’s carriage, things were tense. Luca only had a minute at best to come up with a plan to get himself inside that carriage and next to Vehru without getting caught for being late.

His thoughts raced through his mind, and his eyes lit up, as if crashing into an idea he never knew was there. No matter, it was too late, for he turned his head to his side and found Mastro Vohro sitting on his horse a few feet away from the carriage; he had sneaked up behind them, surveying the procession line with a quiet focus.

In Esterran, “mastro” meant “great.” It was a title given to the Doctors of the Blade School of Daví, meaning the grand teachers of the Davinian blade arts. Mastro Vohro had taught hundreds of Davinians the way of the blades, and possessed a skill that was beyond most Davinian masters.

But Vohro’s journey as a Davinian did not come easy, for since birth, Vohro had been deaf. It was a disability that put him through the greatest hardships as a child, and even onto adulthood. In those days, deaf people were treated as subhuman, forced to rot in the dirt-ridden roads of Esterra. Fortunately for Vohro, he was destined for something greater. After accidentally bumping into a Davinian warrior near the roads where he begged as a young boy, his curiosity for the Order led him to the school; there, he found acceptance and compassion.

At first, most did not believe that a deaf boy could perform such complicated movements that were required to control the powerful Davinian blades, but what Vohro lacked in hearing he made up for it in sight. He could see twice as much as a man and not nearly enough as the sky; this was the gift that had been bestowed upon him at birth. Vohro could decipher every single cut of a blade and every foot of its swing. It was this quality that made him one of the most feared warriors in all of Esterra.

“Err... young master?”

“I see him, Gertred,” Luca whispered, but the young Davinian could not escape Vohro’s immense field of vision. The mastro turned to Luca.

“Having second thoughts?” Vohro said.

“No, Mastro,” Luca said, finding Vohro’s tall and brooding presence quite intimidating. “I’m actually late to the procession line. I sincerely apologize, teacher.”

“It would be foolish to apologize to me,” Vohro said, “for I’m late as well.”

“Yes, true,” Luca said, “but you’re a mastro.”

“And perhaps one day, you’ll be one too,” Vohro said. “But not if you miss the procession line.”

“But how can I sneak into the line?” Luca said.

“Don’t go to the line like a thief, Luca,” Vohro said. “That’s not the Davinian way.”

“You’re right, Mastro,” Luca said. “I *am* late, and I should never have pretended to be otherwise, regardless if my sleeping in this morning was unintentional. It would seem that shame rose with me this morning and has yet to leave me today.”

Vohro, who had been taught to be strong in discerning spirits since he was young, searched Luca’s soul for any sign of spiritual trouble. “There’s no need to wallow in shame, Luca,” Vohro said. “We’re all constantly learning, yet it’s your shame that teaches you knowledge. Shame is there to perfect you, not to consume you. Wasn’t it shame, Luca, that you felt back there when you failed to stop to help the peasants?”

“How did you know about the carriage?”

“I’ve been trained to know a lot of things deep in people’s hearts,” Vohro said.

“It was more than shame that I felt, something like a sense of departure.”

“Departure? From what, might I ask?”

“From a compass hidden deep inside of me.”

“Like you were possibly taking the wrong path?”

“Perhaps,” Luca said. “It was as if the compass was pointing me towards another direction, towards another action; there were two paths, and I chose poorly.”

“Action, you say?” Vohro said.

“Yes. It was as if it was letting me know that I acted in a way I ought not to have acted.”

“Exactly, Jubahn,” Vohro said. “What is not important is what path you choose, but what path you ought to have chosen. You have been taught a lesson, one taught not by books nor learned people, but from something not easily understandable. Yet, you have accepted to learn from it, regardless of its intangibility.”

Luca paused and pondered on his words. “Well, books do help.”

“Spoken like a son of a scribe,” Vohro said with a wide grin. “Come with me.” Vohro offered his help to Luca, and after taking his hand, Vohro pulled him up onto his horse. He turned to Gertred. “Thanks for getting him this far, good sir.”

“Of course, Mastro,” Gertred said. “It was my pleasure and honor. Please do well, Master Luca.”

“Thanks for your help, Gertred,” Luca said.

Following Gertred’s words, music began to fill the air. The people gathered around the

procession line began to cheer for the parade down Ave's Path to commence.

"It's time," Vohro said. But before Vohro could steer the horse in the right direction, he sensed a gray spirit in Luca. "Jubahn, why haven't you told me about the second carriage?"

"You know about that?"

"Luca, it's important you make known all the dark things around you. Never keep those things to yourself. What can you tell me of it?"

"It was exactly like the first, but the families were abnormal," Luca said. "They didn't feel..human."

"So darkness comes."

"What do you mean?" a wide-eyed Luca said.

"Jubahns shouldn't worry about dark things, especially when you need to focus on your testing." Vohro motioned for his horse to head down the last stretch of the road before reaching Ave's Path.

Vohro reached the carriage where his son was waiting and sneaked up on it without the official noticing his presence; he did this not to deceive him but to test the official. Luca promptly jumped off and landed next to Vehru, just as unnoticeably as Vohro had pulled up to the carriage.

The official turned to his side and set his eyes on the young Davinian. "Where did you just come from?" he said. "Ah, well, regardless, we've been waiting for you, young sir. Can you explain why you're late?"

Vohro tapped the official on the shoulder, and he turned to him.

"Mastro!" the official said. "I didn't sense you there."

"But you should have," Vohro said. "Your infatuation with finding out the perpetrator of this empty seat has dulled your senses. That desire caught a hold of you. Expel it and rouse yourself. Break your mind free from that *sleepwalk*."

"Yes, Blademaster," the Davinian official said.

"The young prince was with me," Vohro said. "He was late because of an unfortunate turn of events. When he had knowledge of his error, he did his best to correct it."

"Of course, Mastro," the official said, turning and leaving.

A brief moment passed before Vohro himself was sneaked up on, and he felt a blunt object pressed coldly on the back of his neck.

“Maybe *you* need to wake yourself up from that lucid daydream you tend to drift off to whenever you lecture people about *their* shortcomings,” a mysterious voice said.

Vohro turned around with fire in his eyes. “Maybe *you* need to remember that I’m still deaf,” he said.

“*That* is a good point,” Jeskun said.

“Good morning, Mastro,” both Luca and Vehru chorused in unison.

Mastro Jeskun was the mirror image of Vohro in his younger days, before a vastness of gray had overtaken the deaf swordsman’s beard. Jeskun, on the other hand, was a handsome and muscular man with golden locks, a chiseled face, and a dark beard. He had been Vohro’s longtime personal pupil, and he was a highly adept teacher of blades, especially when it came to the twin blades, the Davinians’ *Nunsurrum* and *Prossesur*; no one in the school was as skilled as he was with these two, not even Vohro.

“Today is a good day for merrymaking,” Jeskun said, tapping his former teacher on his shoulder.

“You never take these things seriously, do you?” Vohro countered.

“What’s there to take seriously?” Jeskun said, rubbing both Luca and Vehru on their heads. “You just go up in front of everyone, pretend that you’re fighting, and then you get a sword. It sounds simple enough, right? It’s not like you’re stuck in some perilous forest in the middle of nowhere, chased by a hideous beast that’s twice the height of a man.” He took a bite of a piece of bread he held in his hand.

“Huh?” Vehru said.

“Young ones need not be hearing those stories,” Vohro said.

Jeskun leaned closer to the boys and whispered, “Remind me sometime to tell you more about that one, definitely when old grumpy here is not around.”

“You know, I can read your lips,” Vohro said.

“Well, yes, I made sure of that,” Jeskun said. “That’s what being a pain in the rear is all about.”

“Ha, I see.” Vohro smiled at Luca and patted his son on the chest. He turned to ride off, but not before taking the rest of Jeskun’s bread. “Much obliged, Blademaster,” he said, galloping away.

“Wow, and yet he always calls *me* the thief!” Jeskun said. “All right then, go break a leg, you

two.”

Luca kind of angled his face at Mastro Jeskun.

“Err...well, you get...you know what I mean,” Jeskun said, his cheeks reddening.

“Of course, Mastro,” Luca said.

Jeskun turned his white stallion around. “I’ll be off now before I make a bigger fool of myself. Good luck!” The boys watched the gallant mastro retreat from them and head to the front of the procession line.

“I have your ceremonial ren,” Vehru told Luca, handing it over to Luca. “You left it at my manor the other day.”

“Thanks for that,” Luca said. He put on his ceremonial ren, donning the colors red and white, those of the Royal Province of Bune. The carriage they sat in was grandiose, and it carried a number of students, Luca and Vehru sat at the front. The procession line stretched for at least a few hundred yards, with all of the Davinian officials near the front.

The Spadas procession was typically made up of only Davinian members, except for the inclusion of the Royal Court of Bune, whose carriage actually led the mile-long parade. Along the path of the procession, all manners of people lined up along the curbs of the road, yelling and cheering the young warriors on. As the whistle rang in the air, nervousness rained down upon the many students who had waited so long for this day. Vehru could not stop fidgeting in his seat.

“I’ve never seen you this anxious,” Luca said.

“I just don’t want to disappoint my father.”

“You needn’t worry about that,” Luca said. “You’re the best I’ve seen this year, and your father knows it regardless of how you do today. I know he’ll be proud of you.” Vehru smiled at his friend. “*If* you don’t mess up, that is.”

Vehru’s smile vanished. “Is that supposed to encourage me?” he asked with a frown.

“Well, I thought it would make you laugh,” Luca said. “Laughter is supposed to calm the nerves, but I guess that’s only for some people.”

“Yes, well, for that to work, you’re supposed to be funny,” Vehru said. “I should have left your ren at home.”

Vehru and Luca nudged each other back and forth for some time.

“Are you done?” Luca said.

“Yes, I feel much better.”

The two friends took in the day's air and appraised the people around them. The energy of the Bunish people seemed to have dissipated from the prior year.

"It's quiet," Vehru said.

"Yes, too quiet," Luca said.

"The people seem tense, on edge," Vehru said.

"That *is* strange," Luca said as he discreetly took a gander at the horizon beyond the mountains.

"Are you ready for this?" Vehru said.

"I've been ready for a long time," Luca said.

Vehru turned to get a good look at the parade behind him and focused on a young Davinian warrior only three carriages away.

"What are you looking at?" Luca said.

"That's Jené," Vehru said.

"Oh?" said a curious Luca, glancing at the famous Davinian. "Do you think he'll hand out the final blades?"

"It's possible—he *is* quite famous," Vehru said. "He might be as famous as you."

Luca just scoffed at his friend's remark.

"Where is your father?" Vehru said.

"He told me he'd be waiting inside the school."

"Why isn't he with the king inside the royal carriage?"

"I don't really know," Luca said, but he knew that it probably had something to do with him and the rift he had caused between his father and the king.

"Maybe he's setting up your tent inside the testing hall?" Vehru said

"Possibly," Luca said with a smile.

The uncomfortable dialogue between him and Vehru made Luca mute for some time as they made their way down Ave's Path. Now and then Luca would stare at the people waving their arms in the air, reaching out to their favorite student. The dynamic spirit of the cheering crowd slowly seeped into his nerves, and he wondered how he would fare in a more private testing instead of the spectacle he was about to endure.

Breaking his thoughts, a small noise came upon him from his rear, followed by a loud *thud* right in between him and Vehru. A long, thin kid about the same age as Luca sat next to him.

Pabru had managed to travel from where he was sitting all the way in the back and across the length of the entire carriage using the other students' shoulders as stepping stones. Needless to say, the students were displeased with him, but he shrugged it off with curt indifference.

Pabru was Luca and Vehru's closest friend, but more annoyingly, a rambunctious little snot.

"I've got something to show you," Pabru said with a devilish grin. "I've been working on it all week." Pabru opened up his right palm and demonstrated his ingenuity to his friends.

"What is it?" Vehru said.

"It's a shiny ball," Luca said.

"It's not just a shiny ball," Pabru said. "I made it out of a strange metal I found a couple of weeks ago, while I was serving in the fields before training." He put his palm up to his face and marveled at the sheer brilliance of his creation.

"It's a ball—how amazing," Luca said.

"It's a *metal* ball, Luca," Vehru said. "Please be more appreciative."

Obviously displeased, Pabru angled his face towards his two friends. "Why do I even bother?"

"Why *do* you even bother?" Luca said.

"You're a quick learner, Pabru," Vehru said. "I'll give you that."

In full retaliation, Pabru dropped the metal ball to his knee and exposed a tiny chain attached to the ball, and with that chain he swung the ball around his head. Instantly, the most deafening sound played against the wind. It was so high pitched, that Luca and Vehru had no option but to bend in agony, covering their ears with their hands. Matter of fact, the whole carriage was in a suffering state.

"What?" Pabru said, who forced himself to speak while simultaneously being tormented by the sound. "Ears hurt, do they?"

The sound stopped, and everyone remained speechless. That is, until a big shoe landed in the back of Pabru's head.

"Ouch!" he said, examining the projectile that landed in front of him. "A shoe? Honestly, who throws a shoe?"

Cries of "me" resonated throughout the crowd.

"Who's *me*?" Pabru said.

"Don't worry about it," Luca said.

“Serves you right!” Vehru said. “How did you make that thing, anyway?” Vehru grabbed the ball from Pabru, gave it a once-over, and passed it on to Luca.

“The Davinian smithy took a chance on it, and it worked out quite nicely,” Pabru said. “The metal itself is what causes the noise. It’s a wonder, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, strange indeed,” Vehru said.

“It’s really light, too,” Luca said as he moved it around and tapped the ball on the side of the bench he sat on. “And sturdy. Do you know where you found this metal? Is there any more?”

“Why?” Pabru said. “Looking to make a new leg?”

Time froze with a silent awkwardness.

Vehru leaned over and smacked Pabru in the head. “Sometimes I wonder.”

“It’s actually not a bad idea,” Luca said. Vehru’s eyes lit up, and Pabru cleared out his ears.

“You mean to say you want a metal leg?” Vehru said.

“Why not?” Luca said. “If it’s light enough, then what would be wrong with that?”

“But you’ll be all shiny,” Vehru said, “and you’d rust for sure.”

“No, not with this metal,” Pabru said.

“Make it happen,” Luca said, turning to Pabru. “If it’s possible, let’s take a go at it—and the stronger, the better.”

While Pabru and Luca talked amongst themselves, Vehru turned his head around to look out into the procession line. Using some quick discernment, he spotted a girl whose whole face was impeded by a white and green flag swaying with the wind. And as if the flag could feel Vehru’s wishes, it revealed the girl’s face—and what a face it was, for it outdid the day’s brilliance. Her golden hair amplified her light eyes, and her freckles were like tiny kisses from the sun. Her name was Luleh bal Heatheranla, and to Vehru, she was more beautiful than anything he could’ve ever imagined.

Both Luca and Pabru synchronously noticed Vehru stretching his neck out like a wild ostrich, and following his line of vision, the two boys immediately came upon what Vehru ogled at.

“What in Ave’s name is going on here?” Luca said.

“Oh, dear,” Pabru said.

Vehru abruptly turned to them, as if he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “What’s the matter?”

“Goodness me,” Pabru said.

“Just stay focused,” Luca said.

“I’m extremely focused, thank you very much,” Vehru said.

“Yes, that’s quite obvious,” Pabru said.

“We’re here,” interrupted Luca.

The procession line reached the end of Ave’s Path, or what seemed to be the end, for the path ended abruptly into a deep gorge stretching straight across for two-hundred yards. At the bottom of the gorge ran the Alcorba River, whose calming streams kept the deep ravine in a state of tranquility.

Across the two-hundred-yard length of the gorge was a huge bridge that was a hundred feet wide, made entirely of gold and marble; it was known as the “Vie ba Lonu,” but to most, especially to all Davinians, it was intimately known as “One’s Path.” The end of the bridge attached to the back wall of the gorge’s cliff, but what was most interesting about the bridge was the structure that it harbored.

The Blade School of Daví stood triumphantly on the great bridge; it was built to encompass the last hundred yards leading towards the cliff. In fact, the actual gorge cliff formed the back wall of the monumental structure. There was a reason for this, for on the face of the cliff making up the back wall of the school was a mysterious, imprinted image of a man who many people believed to be the Blademaker, the founder of the Davinian Order.

The Davinian School was an overwhelming structure—twelve floors constituted the totality of its levels. Nine of the floors were underneath the bridge, reaching all the way down to the bottom of the gorge. The other three were above the bridge and were always referred to as the “Upper Three.” But what stood out the most was a monumental tower known as the “Tower of Daví”, situated near the back of the school.

The architecture of the building was beautifully harsh, with all manners of corners and protruding structures seemingly pointing towards the sky. The whole of the structure was made up of white and gray concrete with marble accents throughout its many nooks and corners. Streaming lines of gold accentuated the architectural lines that kept the building in its geometrical balance. Additionally, the school shone like the stars, due to the many gems that were speckled about; sapphires, emeralds and rubies made the bulk of the captivating sea of mirrored lights.

The procession line started up once again, and the experience of passing along One’s Path

was so uplifting that most souls remained quiet, only listening to the sounds of the soothing stream below them, rustling their garments with the lightest touches of serenity.

At last, the carriages reached the front of the school, and before the Davinians stood two doors composed of the brightest gold known to man. These golden doors seemed to stretch all the way to the sky, for they were all of three stories high and were equally as wide as they were tall. Though the doors were overwhelming in scale, they still brought about a harmony between the ordinary and the grandiose.

The first carriage broke away from the rest and moved forward to the edge of the doors. It carried only one person, and it was he who also sat at the reins of the horses pulling the carriage. He was covered in a white cloak that spoke of glory, and under his hood were a white beard and a hardened face that could move mountains. His hands seemed to shine like a rainbow of gems, and when the wind broke against him, it behaved as if it had hit the highest peak in all of Esterra. This man was Siel, known to all Davinians as the “Servantu Alta,” or “High Servant.” He was the highest Davinian in the land and the head of the Davinian Order.

Siel dismounted the carriage, but nothing was heard, for he was as quiet as a grave in the ground, and when he stepped onto the dirt, the wind had more noise than him, and one could hear the heartbeat of the smallest bird before one could ever hear Siel’s own breathing.

He walked up to the edge of the doors, and although he walked with one foot in front of the other like the rest of men, he seemed to be in one place and the next without the foolishness of steps. Before reaching the doors, he stood silently, opening up his cloak and revealing a white vest that harbored his golden blades. He knelt before the doors and paid his respect to the school.

The golden doors that stood before him rarely opened, for there were two smaller wooden doors located at the bottom-center of the taller, extravagant doors. These were the doors used for entrance, for to pass through the golden doors was to always pass through the poorest of doors; it was the Davinian way.

But before he allowed the students to enter the school, Siel reached for a sack resting near the bottom-right of one of the doors. In the sack was some feed, and there was a jug of water next to the sack. He took both items and walked back to his horses. He began to feed them and give them water, and by doing this, he brought about peace, and the horses were satisfied, and they loved him more each second. The students watched on with admiration, for this was Siel, the greatest of servants.

After the horses had reached their fill, Siel returned to the doors and placed the feed and water back in their places. With a key that hung on a chain around his neck, he opened the wooden doors. Yet, before letting anyone in, Siel turned around and set his eyes on the horizon, lingering near the Bellowing Mountains. Something troubled him. Then he angled his eyes a bit, as if turning his vision to something else, and for a passing moment, Luca could have sworn the Alta was looking straight at him. This only lasted for a few seconds, so Luca thought nothing of it.

“Bring the children in,” Siel said, and there were screams of joy in the air.

One after the other, the students dismounted their respective carriages and convened with each other, forming one straight line. The officials entered first, followed by the students. Once inside, the children were kept in the *Assembly Room*: a long, hallway-like area with twenty-foot windows lined up next to each other spanning the length of the room. Porcelain and marble made most of the surfaces, along with golden accents lining the windows and corners. There was a smell of wild flowers, and the river breeze kept it nice and cool inside. However, no matter how cool it was in there, a heated anxiety circulated itself around the tense crowd of children.

To break the nervousness, a strange sound came forth from outside the doors, seemingly coming from the school’s courtyard. The students turned to look, and there was a huge black mass heading their way. Giant, wind-induced swooshes were heard, like if someone was using a big fan of feathers to circulate air throughout the room. These *were* in fact feathers, but not from a fan, but from something boundlessly more powerful.

The dark mass grew larger, and the swooshing sounds increased. The children were taken aback by its enormity. Seconds later, the mass took shape: that of the biggest bird known to exist in Esterra. It was the great Mor.

The Mor glided over the students, forcing them to quickly duck and scatter. It reached the golden perch that awaited it and stood over the Davinians with its imperial presence.

“Welcome, Prebansa,” Siel said. He turned his presence towards the crowd of students and motioned to the officials, “Shut the doors and begin with the preparations.”

The Visit

MOST OF WHAT HAD BEEN PART OF THE MORNING'S colorful wardrobe had been replaced by a drab overcast. The air grew dense, and a hint of a fog lingered here and there, not noticeable yet—all for a reason. The crowd of people gathered outside the school, for they were not welcomed inside, and had become silent, if not completely inanimate. The wind brutally blew against the trees, as if running away from some eminent danger, and the only sound prevalent was in the distance, and it sounded to all like the clatter of hoofs; a carriage approached from the top of *One's Path* as it made its way towards the front of the school.

The top of the carriage was covered, and it was impossible to note who rode in it, but the carriage itself seemed fancy and overdone. The color of the carriage was a peculiar blood red enhanced with black diamond trimmings. It was pulled by two abnormally large white horses, and though noble, they were thin, as if elongated. Two drivers sat atop the front of the carriage, dressed in black and having the same features, like twins, yet giving out the impression they were neither kin nor acquaintances. They had the whitest hair, neatly groomed, too perfect, and had the brightest green eyes. Their faces were done up, as if makeup had been applied, and they had grins on their faces that would make one's shadow cover into a corner.

CLIP CLOP CLIP CLOP—the carriage rode in a perfectly straight line, and all eyes were on these unannounced visitors as they reached the great, golden doors. By this time all the students and officials had made their way inside the school, so there was no one left to greet any visitors—at least, so it seemed. The horses' menacing look scared some of the kids in the crowd, and the families did their best to control their children's fears.

The two drivers dismounted the carriage, and the crowd could tell that they were strange in size, for they towered over the average man. One made his way to the back of the carriage while the other walked towards the front, taking out a bag that was slumped across his shoulder. Reaching inside, he pulled out a handful of gems. Crouching down, he let his hand swing away as he threw a multitude of gems towards the door, creating a carpet of shimmering rocks; they were diamonds of all sizes, red, white and black.

The other man, who stood near the rear of the carriage, reached for the side door and opened it. The crowd turned their heads to look inside, and all they could see was shadow, and from the shadow came a form, and for an instance, the face of the form seemed foul, but out of the shadows it came, and now the form was that of an attractive woman, stepping out and setting her red leather boots on the ground.

As she revealed herself, the crowd stared at her remarkable robe, which was of a blushing red color. Underneath the robe, she wore a magnificent black dress. The woman also towered over the average man, even more so than her drivers, and her hair was unnaturally red. In her right hand, she carried a scepter made of gold with a huge, black diamond adorning the top of it. She made her way to the doors, elegantly stepping on the diamond carpet laid out for her regal presence.

In the silence of the stares coming from the peoples of Bune, only the crackling of the diamonds was heard as the woman gracefully balanced her long body on the uneven jewels. Those few seconds were filled with the gallant march of the most perverted being the crowd had ever seen.

As she approached the grand doors, the men guarded her, one on each side.

“Get us inside as soon as possible,” the woman in red said.

With that command, one of the men reached for the wooden doors and tried to open it but failed, as it did not budge for him. He reached for a brass handle and used it to knock on the door.

A loud sound echoed inside, and the echo of the knock seemed to disturb the peace that the doors kept, for the school was not keen on entertaining unwanted visitors. Again the man knocked, and this time, it seemed to have sent a shiver along the lengths of the doors, for the stone bricks above the doors began to rumble, and things began to move some feet above them.

Upon closer inspection, this movement had defined forms—two, to be exact. They were

statues, one on each corner of the ledge sloping over the great doors. The statues were menacing, like ancient gargoyles guarding their home from unwanted vermin. The statues' faces were chiseled and had monstrous features, and their eyes were closed, but swiftly opened. These monster-like statues began to increase in size, or so it seemed, since they were now stretching from their crouched position into a more humanlike form, and with catlike qualities they made their way down the stones, headfirst, towards the visitors knocking at the doors.

As they hit bottom, the woman and her guards took a step back, and the statues stood up in front of them, using their eyes to pierce straight through the visitors' souls. The woman, who was first taken by surprise, was now irritated, and she noticed that these two statues were actually men, Davinian Gohrgos to be exact, keepers of the doors, hosts to all men of good will—but there was nothing good about these visitors.

In Davinian tradition, there could be only two Gohrgos at a time. When one passed on, another would be elected to take its place. To become a Gohrgo was considered a high honor, so much so, that the two in unity were second only to the Servantu Alta. They were the second highest in the Davinian hierarchy, both keepers, acting as the one right hand of the High Servant. This was always the case. The two lived as one, breathed as one, and spoke as one.

“What wicked wind do you breathe on this school?” they said in unison, guarding the doors with their bladed staffs.

The two men reacted as if being insulted, but the woman remained calm, except that her face hardened, and her beauty began to fade.

“I beg your pardon,” the woman said. “Is that any way to greet a lady from a far-off land?”

“The school is not accepting any visitors, for today is a day of ceremony.”

“And that's precisely why I'm here,” the woman said. “I come to have an audience with the King of Bune. There is a student I have an interest in.” She tried handing the Gohrgos a scroll neatly sealed by what looked like blood, but the Gohrgos did not move an inch. “Take the scroll,” but the Gohrgos did not heed her request. “TAKE IT!” she said once more, and the crowd gasped at her anger, and the Gohrgos' eyes flashed in contempt.

They stepped back from the towering woman, but not because they feared her, but because they became cautious of her presence, so they gave themselves some space just in case they had to escalate the situation.

The woman in red, noticing the Gohrgos' reaction, calmed herself down, for she did not want

to be denied entrance to the school.

“My apologies,” she said with a smile. “It’s been a long road to this special place, and I’ve been waiting for this day for the longest time. It’s not every day that a woman gets the opportunity to watch her nephew compete for his final blade.”

“Nephew?” they said. “You’re kin to one of our students?”

“Enough with the inquisition!” one of the men said. “Is this how you treat guests to the school? It’s simply unbecoming of a school of this caliber to do so. We have presented a scroll marked by the king of Corco allowing us an audience with your king, which you choose not to acknowledge. A blatant dismissal of our authority is a dismissal of the king of Corco himself. You have falsely reproached us—”

Before the man could finish his rant, the Gohrgos flickered their fingers, as if their hands were commanded to move, but one could not tell, for their movements were quicker than a spoken word, and in this second of time, they managed to swing their staffs in a complete circle, and their blades made contact with the tiniest tip of the man’s nose, which carefully nicked him, shut him up, and left behind a small prick of a wound.

“We find your words unbecoming of nobility, and we take your concerns with a grain of salt,” they said in unison. “Give us the scroll and mind your tongue, lest you want to lose a tip of that as well.”

The woman’s face filled with anger, but she controlled herself, since she was determined to get into the school. Again she tried handing the Gohrgos the scroll, which this time the one on the right took from her. He broke the seal, which made a *hiss* sound, and the Gohrgos hesitated.

“Go on, please,” the woman said. The Gohrgos continued, reading the note to themselves. Their eyes grew big with uncertainty, and one said, “This can’t be.”

The other Gohrgo turned and scowled at him, for they were made to speak in unison and never break their oneness. “Very well,” they said. “You can pass—.”

But before the Gohrgos could finish their last word, the man with the cut on his nose began to panic. The smallest notion of blood seeped out of his nose; it was the smallest pinprick, only visible to someone if they put their eyes no farther than a half-inch from his nose. The man began to breathe in a foul manner, and anxiety overtook him. To him, the wound could have been a gaping gash that split his face in two, for that is how he began to moan in terror. “Oh no!” he said. “What have you done?!”

The Gohrgos did not understand why the man was overreacting to a small cut on the nose, where the amount of blood loss had yet to reach a drop's worth.

The man's eyes began to shake, and he screamed, "Cursed!"

The other man quickly stepped to him, holding the guard in such a way as to muffle his sounds. "Gather yourself."

"Get him out of here!" the woman in red said, taking charge. "Drag him back to the carriage. I'll deal with this matter myself." She turned to the Gohrgos, "Open the doors, please?"

The Gohrgos hesitated, now spooked by the weirdness of the display.

"Please, open the—"

And the oddest thing happened. A large dog, something like a hound, wandered into the commotion, crossing behind the woman's leg, turning the corner only to quickly disappear.

The woman in red caught a glimpse of this hound. Her eyes tightened, and her urgency doubled. "Please! Open the door now!"

Finally, and due only to the scroll's authority, the Gohrgos opened the door, letting her pass. The woman made her way in, and the gatekeepers closed the door behind her. She could not have been quicker if she was on fire.

Only a few seconds passed before they separated and climbed up the stones to take their places back on the ledge that sloped over the great doors. There they waited and kept their stone eyes on the two men in the carriage.

Inside the school, the students gathered in the Ceremony Hall located near the rear of the building. Luca, Vehru and Pabru stood quietly together; their minds were on the testing. They allowed nothing to break their concentration—that is, until someone passed by Vehru, gently brushing against his shoulder. Disgruntled, he turned to the person who disturbed his peace. He saw first a soft smile, followed by a landscape of freckles on a pair of porcelain cheeks, and he was no longer irritated but even more nervous than before.

"Pardon," Luleh said as her white and green ren flapped into Vehru's personal space.

Speechless, the boys could do nothing but stare at the girl, and after a few seconds, a second girl, much older, happened upon them, rudely bumping into Vehru's shoulder once again. She was a couple years older than the boys and had long locks of red hair; it was as if a meadow of flowers bloomed throughout the strands of her mane, and to most, it reminded them of the red

honeysuckle beauty that grew in the meadows of the coastal lands.

She had a striking face, beautiful but battleworn, and overall, it was more intimidating than welcoming. Her name was Lereh bal Heatheranla; she was Luleh's older sister, and as she passed the three boys, she sliced through their souls with a brutish glance, obviously protective of her younger sibling. Luca kept his eyes on Lereh longer than he should have. This was a first for him.

"Wait! Those are them!" Pabru was referring to the "Flowers of Heatheranla" as they were known; the sisters had a notoriety throughout the lands of Esterra as being champions of the people and the youngest to ever see battle as Davinian warriors—and they were feared by most boys.

"So Vehru fancies a Flower of Heatheranla," Pabru said. "How interesting."

"I don't fancy anyone," Vehru said.

"More like a *Thorn of Heatheranla* that older sister is," Pabru said. "At least you picked the right one."

"Leave him alone, Pab," Luca said. "He needs to focus; we all need to focus."

"You're right," Pabru said. "We need to focus." Pabru turned to Vehru, who was still eyeing the sisters as they walked away from him, and gently turned his friend's face away from the girls. "All of us." Vehru agreed, sort of, but began to focus nevertheless.

Yet, his plans were thwarted by an unexpected turn of events.

"Aren't you Mastro Vohro's son?" a freckled-faced beauty said as she popped into his space. Vehru turned to Luleh but said nothing, only whimpered.

Pabru discreetly bumped Vehru in the middle of his back. "Speak, for Ave's sake."

"Wha?" Vehru stammered.

"Goodness," Luca added. "My friend is in his own world; he's that focused on his testing. I'm sure you'd understand. So, tell me, Pabru mentioned you girls are the true Flowers of Heatheranla?"

Suddenly, Lereh broke into the conversation, appearing like a ghost, a presence only felt by the corner of Luca's eye. "Flowers?" she said. "You think us delicate then?"

Pabru quickly whispered in Luca's ear, "I forgot to mention they hate that moniker."

Nice, Pabru. Luca sighed, but regained his wits. "I figured the nickname was due to...beauty," Luca said in a sincere manner. "I meant no disrespect." Lereh fell quiet; the last

thing she thought herself as was beautiful.

“Yes, I’m Mastro Vohro’s son,” Vehru said—*finally*. Everybody stared at him with concern, but Luleh smiled.

Pabru put his arm around Vehru. “He’s special, this one.”

“I heard you guys do a bit of traveling,” Luca said, continuing with his inquiry. “Have you seen much of Esterra?”

“What’s with all the questions?” Lereh replied, a bit unnerved.

Luca stepped back, putting his hands up. “My curiosity got the best of me, *Servantu Lereh*.” Lereh was a seventh-blade, thus a Blademaster, and reverence was due to her by the lesser blades, otherwise known as “Jubahns” or the “young ones.”

“Is it true you have a false leg?” Lereh said, harshly.

Blademaster or not, Lereh bringing up his friend’s disability in such a manner was an unwise move. Abruptly, Vehru was no longer shy, and he donned a great scowl, and his spirit grew immensely.

Humbled, Luca spoke, “Yes, *here* is my wooden leg.” He showed them.

“Then you are truly a remarkable person,” Lereh said, “to get this far in the Order.” Luca’s eyes gleamed, but he hesitated to show his fondness for the girl. “But you still have to make it to your seventh blade. Then, and only then, will you garner my utmost respect.” Lereh broke off from them with her flaming hair loose and wild and that green-laced ren flapping with an authority only a Flower of Heatheranla could ever command.

“Your sister is...well, quite brutish,” Pabru said.

“She can be a bit overbearing sometimes,” Luleh conceded.

“You’re testing for your seventh blade, are you not?” Vehru said, now with a quiet confidence.

“Yes, though I fear the bird will not call my name,” Luleh said, turning her head towards the imperial presence perched up near the corner of the room. The bird met her eyes with an icy stare.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever seen a Mor,” Luca said.

“When the Order was first started,” Luleh said, “it was said that the Blademaster befriended a Mor during his pilgrimage to Esterra’s highest peak.”

“I didn’t realize he had gone to Morland,” Vehru said.

“History says he was intent on reaching the clouds,” Luleh said. “There, he met one of the cloud beasts, the kings of the skies. It’s written that he spoke to the massive bird, and that the Mor was impressed that a creature of the ground could speak the things of the sky, and in time, they became friends, and they talked of the things of dirt and of the wind.”

“How do you know all this?” Luca said.

“My sister has access to the Davinian Registry in the tower,” Luleh said. “She likes to tell me stories on our travels.”

“The Registry?” Luca said.

“Luca, doesn’t your father have access to the Registry?” Pabru said.

“Yes, but he’s never taken me there.”

Out of the blue, a loud *crack* was heard, coming from a large wooden stick. It was the ceremony staff that Siel held in his hand. The Spadas had finally begun.

“Well, I’m off,” Luleh said. “It was a pleasure.”

“Yes, it was!” blurted Vehru, forcing a smile from his affection.

The boys convened with each other after Luleh lost herself in the crowd. “What did she mean by ‘she’s afraid that the bird won’t call her name’?” Pabru said.

“I’m not sure,” Luca said. All three turned to the Mor, who cut their stares with its own, and the boys quickly turned their heads.

Siel walked up to the crowd of students, holding his hands up in order to quiet down the chattering. “We shall commence with our testing!” he said. The students screamed at the top of their lungs; they’d been waiting for this day since they entered the Order, but the excitement circulating throughout the room would soon come to a deafening halt. A feeling of uneasiness filled the hearts of all students. The hall fell mute as the sound of a creaking door was heard. It had been opened, and someone had stepped into the hall without being noticed by the large number of souls occupying the spacious room.

Following the door opening, strange sounds popped off in the air, like hoofs clomping down on the marble-like floor, but these were not hoofs, but the heels of a pair of blood-red boots. This creature came forth from the back of the crowd and made its way through it.

The students broke open like the parting of a sea, and there she was, standing like a statue made of fire and porcelain, and she walked with the scepter in her hand, blinding the jubahns’ eyes with its diamond top as they watched her pass by.

Vohro glided over to Siel's side, and the rest of the instructors throughout the hall stood alert, with blades at the ready. The woman made her way towards Luca, and after reaching the child, stood over him like a grand eagle casting a shadow over its prey.

She turned to Siel and spoke, "I have come for my sister's son."

A Sister's Claim

TWO MOONS, THAT'S WHAT THEY WERE, OR AT LEAST what they appeared to be. The eyes of the strange woman who stood towering over Luca swaddled him with a false sense of well-being. But was this creature truly benevolent? His intuition told him different, or at least, sent waves of confusion up and down his limbs. So, for his own sake, his immediate reaction was to step back, only to have this overbearing woman grace him with a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

As Luca stepped away, he was met by his father, Druuk, who took him back a couple of steps, placing him near a column in one of the corners of the hall. The woman did not turn to them but only raised her head to Siel, Vohro and Jeskun.

The windows throughout the tournament hall darkened, as if they were shunning the sun's rays, and the hall began to lose most of its light. The student's faces grew dim and the air turned cold. Yet, the red-haired lady remained brilliant with her pale skin, and her color began to shine like an aura of immense energy. She wasn't a blinding light, but she radiated the paleness of her skin, and in contrast, her glimmering red hair sparkled, and whenever a small shadow consumed the whole of her hair, the sparkles shined like small stars in the bewitching sky. It was a mesmerizing effect, and it appeared to the Servantu Alta that it was doing its job, for the crowd began to fall into a trance-like state, and this was most disturbing.

Druuk stared at the woman's face, and his eyes opened up as big as they could, for he was captivated by the lady's features. She resembled someone he once loved, who he still loved, and this made him tremble down all the length of his body.

Sensing his stare, the lady turned to Druuk, and as she did, Druuk witnessed her face changing shape for a split second, as if something extraordinarily beautiful had just become as foul as death's stench, but before he could realize her ugliness, she turned pretty once more, now even more so, and again, he was reminded of the face he once held in his arms. She gave Druuk the strangest of smiles and a quick scowl before turning her head back to Siel.

"I have come for my sister's son," the lady in red said. "My sister, who was Evehnieh bal Astrahl. You might have known her as Evie bal Bune, mistress to the Prince of Bune."

Upon hearing this, Druuk filled up with anger and mumbled under his breath, "She was not my mistress."

"Reveal yourself, visitor, before we speak any further," Siel said in a calm but stern voice.

"I am Malasorta bal Astrahl," the lady said. "I come from the northern mountains, from the region of the crescent moon, where there is no sun."

"Why have you brought darkness into this hall today?" Siel said.

"I know not what you speak of," Malasorta said. "I only bring happiness, as you yourself can witness."

With that comment, Siel turned to look at the crowd and noticed that all of them were staring at Malasorta as if they were in pure ecstasy. Siel motioned for Vohro to approach him but realized that he, too, was hypnotized. He turned to his left and saw Mastro Jeskun trying to fight the effect, but failing with every second that passed. And now Siel was beginning to get frustrated with this impromptu visit.

"Open your eyes," whispered Siel.

Instantly, everyone snapped out of their trances, gasping for breaths. Siel motioned to Mastro Jeskun. "Gather everyone and take them to the meeting hall, and stand guard with the rest of the officials," Siel said. "Do this speedily."

"At once, High Servant," Jeskun said. He ran down to the crowd and began herding them to the other room.

Within moments, the hall became vacant, except for a few, who now surrounded Malasorta. Druuk's older brother, the first prince, appeared next to him in order to get a closer look at the lady. The first prince's name was Drunen, and he was as tall and as elegant as his younger brother. Drunen was also surprised at the similarities between Evie and the powerful presence that stood in front of him, but the strangeness of Malasorta's face was so strong that it bothered

all of his inner senses.

Her cheeks were like carved stone, her lips like soft sponge, and her eyes were of silver pearls. She had lashes so long that they seemed powerful enough to ensnare the smallest creature that came upon them. She was a strange beauty, one that exceeded the normal boundaries of beauty, that is, something never known to man, but only in dreams. She was that vision found in those moments where one would walk under the blue moon in the grayest of nights and turn a head to a passing shadow, only to be left with an idea of an image, something foreign to the space that held up one's surroundings.

Drunen recognized this as being so and walked up to his brother to express his concerns. "Is she truly her sister?"

"I don't believe so, brother," Druuk said. "She never mentioned a sister. She never mentioned any family, really. I asked her about her past a few times, but was always met with resistance, so I pursued it no more. I didn't care. I was happy with the woman I knew. I would assume it a possibility for her to have kin, but this—this is just strange."

"She looks remarkably like Evie," Drunen said. "But you're right. There's something not right about her. I just... Regardless, brother, we must proceed with caution."

"Rightly so," Druuk said.

The woman turned to the brothers, making her way towards them. "My time is valuable, sweet princes," Malasorta said. "As I believe yours is as well. We can do without the whispering of things under a cloud of royal breaths. It would be pointless, for I can hear the smallest of squeaks as far as the eye can see. Oh, yes! My eyes are profound, more so than the darkest waters of all the seas. But—" She stopped and glanced at Vohro, who was to her right. "I'm not the only one here who can see all things beneath the sky? Or have I misjudged you, deaf one?"

And now everyone's focus was on the formidable mastro, whose eyes were blooming bigger than ever. He had yet to come out of her enchanting spell.

"What's wrong, O vessel of silence?" Malasorta said. "Have I offended you in any way? Does my loud voice mock you? Are you having difficulty reading the redness of my lips? Do they trample on my words, moving too fast, at a speed inconceivable to you?"

Vohro saw her mouth moving at a rapid rate, faster than any mouth had ever moved, yet Malasorta spoke with a normal voice, and her words were crystal clear to all around.

"Or do I speak as if death has overcome my mouth and left only but bloodless stone as my

lips? Do they not speak to you as they should?”

And now Vohro witnessed something different, for Malasorta’s lips were moving as slow as the setting sun, to the point that it appeared as if they had no movement, yet again, to others in the room, she spoke with a normal voice at a normal rate of speed.

Vohro’s catatonia grew stronger by the minute. The spell Malasorta’s presence had put on everyone in the hall had been amplified by his embracing eyes, so it was ten times as strong and ten times as hard to break out of. But even though he was in a catatonic state, he was still aware of himself and also of his movements. This woman fascinated him, and he moved down from the altar and began circling Malasorta.

Luca, who had been witnessing everything, was all of a sudden hostage to a sudden fear creeping over him.

Vohro circled the woman, discerning the prey before him. She gave him the pleasure of being the subject of curiosity as she stood placid, allowing him to fondle her with his charismatic eyes.

“What do you see, O eyes of the brightest moons?” she whispered. “Do you see me foul?”

Vohro paused, for he felt odd. The room had turned nocturnal black, and all the souls around him had disappeared. Malasorta’s form slowly began to fade away, or so it seemed, for in a way, it appeared as she had transformed into something else, something abominable. And his dream-like ecstasy turned into a vision, and he saw a dark hill lit up by an angry moon, and upon that hill was a towering monster of human form with long, flowing hair. It was tall and lean, but appeared to be beyond powerful. It was the foulest of creatures, and to Vohro, it was death itself.

On the creature’s backside, Vohro could make out a soaring sword of wonder, and he felt the power that it gave off. The moon shone brighter, and more was revealed. The creature was surrounded by a number of wooden stakes, and on these stakes were the bodies of the most innocent of creatures—what seemed to be babies in skeletal form.

A hurt so ferocious brewed throughout Vohro’s soul that he screamed with his being, but nothing came out. Fear was now the master of his eyes, and they gave out such a tumultuous tremble that Vohro could have sworn he felt the ground moving. He stopped breathing, for he saw the monster lift up a child in torment. His eyes reached for the child, zooming in on his pain. It was Vehru, who had been impaled by the creature’s sword. The foul thing laughed at the sky like a cackling hyena, bringing Vehru up to its mouth in order to take a bite out of his flesh.

“No!” screamed Vohro, and without thought, he reached for his long blade, but before he

could unsheathe his sword, Siel came upon him in a flash, as if he had just appeared in front of him, throwing his arms around Vohro's mass, holding him in a strong grip.

"Wake, dear friend," the white High Servant said.

Vohro awoke from his trance, finding himself in the arms of his master. He wanted to talk but couldn't, and all that was heard were the sounds of a deaf man trying desperately to communicate his thoughts.

"Compose yourself, Mastro!" Siel said. "You have been caught up in a spell. Focus yourself on the moment. Let it go."

As Vohro stared into his master's eyes, he felt peace come upon him.

"Guard me, my loyal Davinian," Siel said.

He let go of Vohro from his viselike grip and turned to Malasorta, whose face brimmed with a sinister smile.

"Now," Siel said as he stepped up to Malasorta with Vohro following close behind. "What is the nature of your visit other than to claim what is not yours to claim?"

"Confidence and stupidity will not garner you any respect from me," Malasorta said.

"Then I have spoken correctly," Siel said. "My words were carefully chosen. I suggest you do the same and choose yours wisely. Don't let any of your vile spit reach my blades."

"You wouldn't be so quick to pick at me with your tongue if we were under different circumstances," Malasorta said. "Perhaps alone in a forest, under the darkest of moons?"

"Is that a challenge?" Vohro said.

"Enough!" cried a voice from the shadows. It was Dren, the King of Bune. He was as impressive as his two sons, but advanced in years.

Just as the king spoke his words, the doors to the hall opened, and a slew of royal guards rushed in. Drunen gave them a quick sign with his hand, and the group broke up into two, heading in opposite directions, staying close to the walls, ultimately surrounding them from corner to corner.

"You will need more than that to silence me, your highness," Malasorta said.

"They are not here to silence, but to let you speak freely," King Dren said. "So state your business, and please elaborate on your claim."

"Very well," Malasorta said as she pulled out a small scroll from her coat. "I have a letter here in my hand from the king of Corco himself. He has empowered me to come here and make

a claim for my sister's son, the boy you know as Lucanah bal Bune. I have papers verifying that I am the sister of Evehnieh bal Astrahl, and by my birthright I can lay claim to any of her offspring."

"What's happening, father?" Luca said. "Who is she? Is she really my mother's sister? Am I kin to that, father? What does she mean, she wants to claim me?"

"Please, Luca" Druuk said. "None of what she has said is true. I know it to be so. You aren't going anywhere. I'm your father; you belong to me. She can't just take you. Just stand behind me and look lively."

Luca did as he was told, and he took a few steps back, hiding himself in the shadows given off by the darkness in the room, and in that blanket of blackness, his eyes lit up like the brightest planets in the night sky, and for once he seemed odd. How much do we really know about young Luca?

"Why the king of Corco must align himself with affairs that are not his own is most troublesome indeed," King Dren said.

"At least the king has enough courage to step out of his realm," Malasorta said.

"What do you know of the king's courage?" Drunen said.

"Why should we journey abroad where there is no sun?" Druuk chimed in. "Darkness always lies beyond what we can see with our own eyes. Tell me, Lady Malasorta, how dark does it get under that moon of yours? In that northern land where the sun has been shunned by all who breathe in darkness?"

"You obviously have not been to my land," Malasorta said. "The sun has not shown its face for a number of years, and that's how I prefer to have it. At first, when the sun was expelled from our land, when with each day came less light from above, my being was in torment. I cursed the skies for taking away the sun. But after some introspection, I realized the sun itself made the choice not to return to our land, to leave me and my kin, and we grew angry, and despair overtook the land. In time, I began to not miss the light of the sun, and after years and years of darkness, I know not the sun. And that is how I prefer it. It would do you well not to ever come to my land."

Malasorta moved closer to Druuk, sidestepping to get a better look at Luca. "Now, him," Malasorta said. "My precious boy, you belong with your aunt. You belong in the land of no sun."

"No, you lie!" Druuk yelled. "Evie never had a sister."

“And how would you know?” Malasorta said. “There are a lot of things she didn’t tell you. You can’t be sure that she didn’t have kin. Just look at me. I bear the resemblance of your past love. How can you deny it?”

“You may look like her in some sort of crude way, but you are not like her,” Druuk said. “She didn’t have an ounce of foulness in her. She was a kind woman. She was the beauty in the birds’ song. She couldn’t have come from your land.”

“Now who is truly lying?” Malasorta said. Druuk grimaced.

“My brother is right,” Drunen said. “Evie was nothing like you.”

“Lady Malasorta, I knew Evie bal Astrahl for the time she was with my son,” King Dren said. “Though I disapproved of her and my son’s relations, never did I feel this way around her as I feel around you.”

“And what way is that, sire?” Malasorta said.

“Cautious,” Siel said.

Malasorta turned to Siel, but silence was her only response, and she spoke on the matter. “But how do you know caution when you don’t even know me?”

“This caution doesn’t come from knowing,” Siel said.

“You speak nonsense,” Malasorta said. “Regardless of what you feel, I have these papers, written in stone. One is the validation of my birth as a bal Astrahl. The second is a validation of Evehnieh’s birth as a bal Astrahl. Following, I have a decree here signed by all provinces in the land of Esterra, including both royal provinces, stating the rights of kin to claim any birthright of their kin’s children if death were to ever befall their parents. And Prince Druuk *certainly* is not his father.”

“You lie!” Druuk said. “How can you come here and speak that garbage?”

Malasorta gazed sternly at Druuk. “You *know* you can’t prove that’s your son. How do we know he’s really yours? Rumor is, you mysteriously showed up one night with him in your arms as my sister was struck down by some horrendous beast you claim attacked you both. And that story is all you have to claim him as your own. Well, I have more of a claim to him than you!”

Those last few words made Druuk uncomfortable in many ways as he clenched his fists to contain his anger. What did she truly know about his son’s birth?

“Most importantly, I have a signed release by my sister herself giving me full rights of any future offspring of hers.”

The king's face took a turn for the worse, and the princes' stares fell to the floor, as if they had been bested in the greatest of battles. Luca's eyes, still visible in the shadows of the hall, began to fade as he slid down the wall into a crouched position.

"That can't be," Druuk said to himself. "That can't be her signature. It has to be a forgery."

"Be careful how you throw about accusations, old prince," Malasorta said. "I have the papers here in my hand giving me the authority to claim young Luca as my own. And what do you have, prince? Your word? Luca doesn't even have your semblance. He is his mother's own! And I, her sister and his aunt, his *true* kin!" She closed in on Luca. "As such, dear princes and king, the boy will need to leave immediately with me, and most importantly, he will not test for his final blade. He will have nothing to do with this school anymore."

Without restraint, Luca stood up and sprinted towards Malasorta to give her a few choice words, but before he could reach her, his father grabbed him.

"No!" Luca said. "You lie! You can't make me come with you. I don't want to. I don't believe you. You can't make me not test for my blade. You can't make me forget everything that I've worked for. It's not your right. I don't care what those papers say. I'm a Davinian whether you like it or not!"

"Luca, please calm down!" Druuk begged his son. "Let us handle this."

"Foolish nephew, it is not your choice to make," Malasorta said. "In time, you will forget all you have ever known, and you will come to know the land of no sun, even if it means us bringing death to *your* sun."

"I don't care who you say you are," Luca said. "I'm not your nephew. You're not my kin. And even if you were, I would deny it. I would disown you."

"Luca!" Druuk said.

"Nephew, your charm far exceeds your manners," Malasorta said. "He has his mother's vigorousness." Malasorta stepped up to the king and handed him the papers. The king looked them over, and all seemed valid.

"How do you know they aren't forged, Father?" Drunen said.

"I've seen many decrees and many useless invalid documents in my life, son," King Dren said. "I can tell the difference between falsity and truth. Sadly, these papers seem to be honest enough. There is nothing in their writing and in their look that might point to a forgery. No, these are truly the words of truth. These papers are valid. But even so, Lady Malasorta, you cannot just

walk in here and retrieve your claim in a matter of seconds. There are procedures. There is protocol. We cannot hand over the child on the whim of your claim. It will take days.”

A solemn silence followed the king’s words.

“Hand over the child?” Druuk said, breaking the silence. “Can’t you see she’s no kin to Luca? Are we not to even investigate this claim?”

“What’s the use, Son?” King Dren said. “The documents are valid. But if you must investigate, do so in the few days you might have left with Luca.”

“You are unbelievable, Father,” Druuk said making an advance towards the king, but was held back by Drunen. “You’re just going to give up?”

“What else can we do?” King Dren said.

“I know what we’re *not* going to do,” Drunen said. “We aren’t going to give him up. Don’t worry about it, Brother. Her efforts are fruitless. Luca isn’t leaving Bune, even if it means a breaking of alliances and so called decrees.”

“Now *you* are being foolish,” the king said.

“Am I, Father?” Drunen said as he approached Malasorta. “Still, why now, my lady? Why have you waited until now to present yourself with your claim?”

“No reason,” Malasorta said, who was obviously harboring many secrets. “It was just time to make my claim.”

All of this talk had made Siel grow weary. “There are too many breaths lingering about this hall,” Siel said. “The temperament of your exchanges has blinded all of you to the worthlessness of her documents. Why do you bring these useless papers? I can sense you possess knowledge way beyond that of the average man. So you know your papers are meaningless.”

“I know not of what you claim,” Malasorta said.

“Don’t tell me that you are unaware of the laws that have been written in stone since this school was first established,” Siel said. “I think you’re wise enough to understand that one of those laws concerns the conditions involving the admittance of a student. Particularly, the precept that speaks of the student becoming the son or daughter of the school, whereas the school becomes its legal overseer until that student is of age and knowledge to become a servantu, meaning no longer a jubahn. And to become a servantu, one would need to earn their final blade. Luca has yet to earn his final blade, so he is still a jubahn, a son of the Order of Daví.”

Siel moved closer to Malasorta, so close that the shortest of his blades could reach her throat

at any moment. “Lady of the foul moon, Luca does not belong to you,” Siel said. “He belongs to me! And he *will* test for his final blade.”

“He’s correct in this,” King Dren said as he approached Malasorta.

“What trickery is this?” Malasorta said as her face began to lose some of her youthfulness.

“This is no trick, Malasorta,” Drunen said. “The High Servant is right. My rage over your claim had blinded me to the fact. Luca signed a contract when he was admitted to the school at the age of six. We were all there to witness it. We were all proud, including the king, even though he may seldom show it.” The king might have winced at the comment.

“At any rate, your stupid laws don’t matter,” Malasorta said. “None of your school’s inferior rules matter when it comes to the laws of the land.”

“It matters in my kingdom,” the king said. “And as king, I recognize the contract between Luca and the school to be binding. Now, you may go and try to get another handful of decrees and papers and come back to refute my ruling; it is your right. But at the moment, the boy stays here, and the day will continue as it was before.”

Angered, Malasorta turned her sights on Luca, and her eyes made a connection with his. Luca felt something stirring inside of him, a certain sixth sense, amplifying the reality of his being, as if he had just crossed into a more complex and larger world. He had felt this feeling before but only on rare occasions. Why and how could she have stirred up these abnormal feelings? He was curious.

“And what about you, my nephew?” Malasorta said.

“I’m not your nephew,” Luca said as he tried to resist her enchantment but easily failed. He stepped up to her.

“Luca,” Druuk said, feeling his son break apart from him.

“Luca, my boy, wouldn’t you want to know all about those strange things that swim inside you?” Malasorta said as Luca moved closer. “Come to me.”

Luca reached her, and Malasorta held out one of her slender, regal limbs. “Give me your hand.”

But Luca was stronger than she had imagined, for he was not in a trance. He was just a curious young boy, and he wondered why he had felt a connection with this being. Malasorta resembled his mother in many ways, but she was lacking what Luca had always known to be the truth of beauty, and that was the unseen light he could recognize in his mother’s warm eyes

whenever he glanced at the portrait he kept of her.

“You are no kin to me,” Luca said.

Frustrated, she could no longer stand the triviality impeding her right to take her nephew away. Without warning, she went and grabbed Luca’s arm, pulling him to her so hard that she nearly took his arm out of its socket. “The child will come with me now!” she said. “He belongs to US!”

With that screeching yell, the room growled with sick moans, and the darkness suffocated the only light that lived in the room, and all stepped back in fear of the lady—all except Siel.

Siel’s eyes grew, as if he had confirmed something he had always known, and faster than any spoken word, Siel unsheathed his long blade from his back, raising it up to Malasorta’s throat, and with the movement of his blade came a tremendous gust which knocked Malasorta and Luca a few feet back. Her hair flew high, and she was trumped by his power, and light once again occupied the room.

Everyone began retreating backwards, as to give Siel some space, for whenever Siel drew his Rasplendur, the breaking of the skies followed, and the thunder of earthquakes accompanied him.

“I won’t give him up so easily, old one,” Malasorta said, letting go of Luca with force. “Are you prepared to fight me?”

“I’m prepared to punish you for making me draw my sword,” Siel said.

But Malasorta’s eyes turned to something lingering in the shadows to the far right, behind the wall of guards who stood with their swords and shields at the ready. It was a large, shapeless form that was visible for only a breath, and then disappeared as if it was never there. Malasorta was spooked, and she turned back to Siel and to the others in the room; she even searched the rest of the hall with her worry-laden eyes.

The lady in red started to back away from everyone in retreat of the unknown. “The boy is coming with me whether you like it or not,” Malasorta said as she withdrew to the end of the hall, still facing Siel, as her eyes escaped the light into shadow. “I won’t leave without him.”

“Lady Malasorta, it would serve you well not to make me unsheathe my blade again,” whispered Siel to himself as he returned the blade to its resting place. “Next time, I will not draw it so lightly.”

Siel called out to one of his mastros and spoke, “Mastro Jeskun, get together with the first

prince and ride out to seek the lady. Don't let her out of your sight."

And as Malasorta reached the door at the end of the hall to exit the room, Siel turned to Vohro and spoke with certainty, "Ring the examination bell. The testing will begin immediately."

A Hole Amidst the Fog

THE BLACK BIRD STOOD ON ITS PERCH WITH ITS imperial presence, letting out a regal yell that electrified the hearts of all who stood in its company. The students communed with each other, most of them curious as to the nature of the odd woman's visit. Siel interrupted their gossiping.

"This is Prebansa, the great Mor," he said. "We Davinians have had a symbiotic relationship with the Mors since the beginning of the Order. They know of things that are not known to us, as we know of things that are foreign to them. Together, we complete all knowing. Prebansa, we are humbled by your visit to our school. I'm sure that you'll perform your part with truth. Please bid me the opportunity to address my students regarding the rules of the testing." Prebansa sounded off with its golden beak as a reply to his friend.

"Everyone, I'll make this brief," Siel said. "We must make haste for various reasons. In a few minutes we'll begin, and all who are called by the Mor will be required to respond immediately to the examination circle, bow to the officials, and begin with their forms. There are few things to keep in mind, Jubahns. First, all forms *must* be performed perfectly. As you know, during testing, you'll not be given a chance to redo a form if you fail to execute it the first time. There is truth behind this reasoning, for in real combat, there are no second chances. All forms will be performed perfectly regardless of the reason. There are no *excuses*!

"Second, all forms must be performed at full strength, speed, and power. Don't hold back, or *you* will be held back. Third, it's no secret that if you fail the testing, we will re-evaluate your level of mastery and decide the length of time needed before another examination is given. And

lastly, though it seldom happens, and according to his will and authority, the Mor is capable of withholding your name from being announced, thus denying you the opportunity to test for your blade. This is as it has always been and as it always will be. I have confidence that everyone will test, so do place your thoughts on other things, specifically your forms. And so another year of examinations will commence, but I'll grant you a short recess to gather your thoughts."

The students dispersed to their respective places, like an army of ants scrambling about when their anthill has been disturbed. As Luca made his way to the Bunish corner, he saw his friends waiting for him.

"I would like details, please," Pabru said.

"Then you're out of luck," Luca said. "I won't talk of things that need not be mentioned."

"But we're your friends," Pabru replied. "You can tell *us*. Who was that beast of a woman?"

"Her name is Lady Malasorta," Luca said.

"She's from the sunless land, isn't she?" Lereh said, who had unexpectedly walked up behind Luca with Luleh trailing behind.

"So far as we know," Luca said.

"What did she want?" Vehru said.

"Are you to leave?" Luleh said with an honest worried look.

"No, he's not," Lereh said. "I won't let her take you." Her remark gave out a multitude of meanings. "I meant that she has no right to claim any Davinian for herself."

"I agree with her," Vehru said, garnering a warm smile from Luleh.

"Enough of this talk," Luca said. "Gossip is best left to fairer things. Nothing this dark should be mumbled under our breaths, so, drop it."

"If you say so," Pabru said.

"He's right," Lereh said. "No need for us to stir things up more than they already are, especially if they come from shadow."

"You sound like you know something of that," Vehru said.

"Traveling alone throughout the lands makes one weary of the shapeless things hiding beyond the darkness of a night's fire. If you only knew the land as well as us, you'd understand."

"How long have you been traveling so?" Luca said, curious about his newfound crush.

"Since we were little," Luleh said. "Mother made it a habit to take us with her during her travels as a Scribe of Heatheranla."

“Your mother was a scribe?” Luca said.

“Oh, yes, one of the best,” Luleh said. “She was well liked, and she was popular, not just in Heatheranla but in most provinces. So we went with our mother whenever work called her to far-off places.”

“And your father?” Pabru said. “What of him?”

“He’s dead,” Lereh said abruptly, turning her eyes to Luleh.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Luca said. To break the awkwardness brought about by Lereh’s remark, Luca moved on to something else. “Do any of you take up the pen as well?”

“No,” Lereh said, with a simultaneous “Yes” from Luleh.

“Well, which one is it?” Vehru said.

“My sister denies it, but she likes to write certain things here and there,” Luleh said.

“Me too,” Luca said, and it almost seemed as if Lereh gave a hint of a smile. “So, if you don’t mind me asking, what do you write about?”

“Well, I read a lot about the blade arts and the different styles,” Lereh said proudly. “But I don’t write much about that. I’m also fascinated with history and legend, specifically the cosmos and all the planets, and of course the stars. I’m mostly fascinated with the old tales of the Umbradors; I write mostly about them—from time to time, that is.

The boys were quiet.

“The Umbrawhat?” chimed in Pabru.

“The Old Stars,” Vehru clarified. “Didn’t your parents ever teach you, Pabru? It’s old stuff, from the beginning. You don’t remember about the tales of the Elder Stars and how each one of us has a star that corresponds to our soul; and that long ago, many stars came down from the sky and roamed the land before the age of men? There are a slew of books on the subject.” Luleh was taken aback by Vehru’s impressive historical knowledge.

Pabru burst out in laughter. “So you write fables?”

“Call it what you wish,” Lereh said, “but taking the amount of witnesses I’ve interviewed across the land, my logic only points me to something probable.”

“What? They’ve seen stuff?” Pabru said.

“Everyone sees something now and then, especially in shadow,” Luleh said.

“I would like to run up on an Umbrador one day,” Vehru said, “if only to satisfy my—”

But Luca interrupted, as if he had not even heard anyone speaking except for the voices

inside his head. He was elated! “So you write about Umbradors?!”

Lereh was surprised with Luca’s interest. “I write what I can, when I can,” she said. “What do you know about them?”

“I’m fascinated with the old cosmic tales,” Luca said. “My father talks of the Elder Stars on occasion, but he’s never really taught me anything about them. He says he will one day, but he hasn’t yet.”

“What’s there to teach?” Pabru said. “It’s all nonsense.”

“But it’s interesting,” Luleh said.

“It’s more than just interesting,” Lereh said.

“It’s another world,” Luca replied.

Lereh had a slight sense of joy, for she now had something in common with Luca, but she did not make this known.

“Would you show me some of what you’ve written one day?” Luca said. He noticed a small medal hanging from a sparkling chain around Lereh’s neck. “You can tell me about the medal you wear; I’ve noticed that. Is that not a drawing of an Umbrador?” Luca inched his head forward to get a better look.

“I wouldn’t get too close,” Pabru said. “You’re getting near a blade’s length, and Lereh doesn’t seem like the type to allow anyone to invade her personal space.”

“That’s the smartest thing your friend has said all day,” Lereh said. “So let’s not get too friendly, Jubahn. I’m not eager to share anything with a sixth-blade.” All the attention she was getting seemed to have closed her off, reddening her cheeks. “What do you care about this medal anyway?”

“Nothing, never mind,” Luca said, obviously disappointed. After an awkward moment, Lereh walked away from them feeling somewhat embarrassed.

“Pay no attention to my big sister,” Luleh said. “She’s not fond of talking about herself.”

“I meant no harm,” Luca said, mad for being so clumsy with words. *I have no idea what I’m doing.* He lowered his eyes and tightened his jaw.

“Forget about her, Luca,” Pabru said. “Let’s worry about our final blades, our Rasplendurs.”

“You’re right,” Luca said, trying to forget about the red-haired beauty. He turned his eyes upward only to be met by the giant bird’s commanding gaze.

Luleh sensed a cloud of uneasiness interfering with Luca’s thoughts, and he seemed to be

losing confidence. “Are you all right, Luca?”

“What if the Mor doesn’t call my name?” Luca said. “It felt dark when it flew in. Look at it. It keeps staring at me.”

The Jubahns glanced at the bird sitting atop the golden perch with its imposing eyes staring back at them.

“You see, I don’t think it likes me,” Luca said. “What if it has something against me? What if it’s in league with Lady Malasorta?”

“It sounds like you’re fishing for conspiracies,” Vehru said. “The Mor is a good friend of the Servantu Alta, and if Siel doesn’t suspect anything, you shouldn’t either.”

Luca glanced over towards Siel and saw his master sitting in his chair pondering, resting his head on his fist, and he noticed that Siel’s focus was on the colossal bird perched up in front of him. Maybe the master *did* suspect something.

“Humph,” Luca said.

“Come on, Luca,” Pabru said with a sly smile. “Let’s worry about this when all three of us are servantus—when we are men.”

The three friends made their way back to the Royal Province of Bune’s tent, where they found a quiet spot to themselves to sit and put their thoughts on their upcoming exam.

Meanwhile, far away from the school, near the outskirts of the palace, overlooking the banks of the Alcorba River, Drunen stood on his horse, reading the silent whispers caressing his sense of being. The remote skies were full of gray, as if a wave of thunder approached from the horizon. Mastro Jeskun and the royal guard caught up to Drunen, and they too witnessed the faraway clouds steadily approaching them.

The purple horizon subdued the fading blue sky, and it was likely for the three men to have mistaken a shadow-drawn silhouette for a human shape, so their wits had to be twice as sharp if they were to discern a threat emanating from any given direction at any given time.

Drunen focused his gaze on the land around him; there still lived a small amount of light about, so he could still see forms and shapes, and he was confident he would be able to spot Malasorta’s carriage. He turned an eye towards each direction, yet he did not see a shape in the form of what he searched for.

“She couldn’t have disappeared that easily,” Drunen said, wary.

“The lady must be hiding in the shadows,” the guard said as he rode up closer to his prince.

“My prince, I will discern the land,” Jeskun said as he dismounted his horse and walked towards the edge of the Bunish moors overlooking the hills that led down to the Alcorba River.

Mastro Jeskun seemed out of place, not with his surroundings, but with his companions, for the prince and guard were painted by the lively colors of the palace. On the contrary, Jeskun was like a twin to the dusk, with his black, battle-worn ren covering his upper body and his engrossing, wide-brimmed hat casting a dark shadow across most of his face.

Jeskun set his sights on the accumulation of darkness in front of him and stared at it with the intent to find what he needed. Using his spirit, he sensed the things around the black, shapeless masses and came upon something hidden.

“She’s not here, but her presence still lingers,” he said, making his way back and mounting his horse. “We must cross the river.”

“What is there, Mastro?” Drunen said.

“We’ll find out soon enough.” Jeskun grabbed his horse, Dahkar, by the reins, and without warning, galloped down the grassy landscape and across the river, to the edges of a far-stretching field known as “The Plains of the Moon.” Drunen and the royal guard followed behind cautiously, fearing being drawn into something unnatural.

Jeskun slowed his pace, for he could sense that something was afoul with the clouds hovering dangerously close to the grayish moors; they were not as ethereal as they were typically known to be, but appeared dirty as if something had stained them.

In the shadows, he saw it: a massive structure. It was the lady’s carriage, abandoned and resting on its side. They strode up to it carefully, stopping just a few feet away from the wreckage.

“I wonder what happened here,” Drunen said, moving his eyes amongst the various pieces of debris.

“Steady your words, my prince,” Jeskun said. “Wonderment is kin to the dusk, thus it is no comrade of ours. Wonder is the nectar of the unknown. Drink little and be enlightened; drink too much and be cursed. Let us not wonder on the wreckage for too long, lest we end up ensnared by the grayness of shadow.”

Jeskun dismounted his horse and stepped up to the wreckage in order to study it closer. “There’s no blood, not a single trace.”

“So, were they taken?” Drunen said.

“That I cannot say,” Jeskun said. “Although it seems—that’s odd.”

“What is?” Drunen said.

“According to these tracks, they left on their own,” Jeskun said, studying the footprints on the ground. He moved to the front of the wreckage. “The horses must have broken free, and after a few yards...disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” the guard echoed. “I wonder how?”

“Can you tell what direction Malasorta and her guards took?” Drunen said.

Jeskun moved to the back of the slain carriage, following the tracks embedded deep in the mud. “From the looks of it, it appears that the tracks go on for hundreds of yards all the way to the north, to Loshendu Forest,” he said. He turned his eyes upward and noticed more tracks coming in the opposite direction. “There were others here.”

“What others?” Drunen said, becoming paranoid and keeping his eyes on every object that surrounded them.

Jeskun put his hand in one of the tracks sunk deep into the ground. “Seven horses stepped out of Loshendu Forest—four with riders,” he said. “It looks like Malasorta and her guards mounted the other three horses, and all of them made their way towards the—.”

“Towards the what?” Drunen said.

“Towards the fog,” Jeskun said, pointing in the direction in which they came from.

“What fog?” Drunen said, turning his horse around. A great fog had mysteriously appeared between them and the Davinian school.

“I didn’t notice any beginnings of a fog on our way here, my prince,” the guard said, “otherwise I would have alerted you.”

“It’s all right,” Drunen said. “I’m afraid you couldn’t have seen this coming. None of us could have. This fog did not come upon us by accident.”

“There was someone else,” Jeskun said as he took himself a couple of steps away from the horses’ tracks, “a man, on foot. He was with them, but he travels some steps behind, as a lookout, I suspect.” And after coming to an inner realization, Jeskun seemed alerted. “My prince, come here.”

Drunen dismounted his horse and approached Jeskun.

“If you look here—the man’s footprint.”

“What of it?”

“Do you recognize it?”

“I do; it’s Davinian,” Drunen said. “There’s a servantu with them.”

“No, the tracks are too light for a servantu,” Jeskun said. “This is a master traveling with the pack.”

“Then we must ride out and inform Siel,” Drunen said, turning to the horizon, but the Davinian master did not answer. “Mastro Jeskun?” Drunen turned to Jeskun and saw him moving a few yards away, standing silently in the night’s embrace. Jeskun studied the horizon. “Mastro, we would do well to leave now.”

“I don’t understand this,” Jeskun said. “We’re dealing with unknown things here, and I sense that more is to come.” Jeskun ran back and mounted Dahkar, and all three turned to the direction of the coming fog.

“What do you think we will find in that fog, Mastro?” Drunen said.

“Answers, I hope,” Jeskun said as he took off into the gray mist.

“Or darkness,” Drunen said, mounting his horse. “Come on, guard. Let’s not keep ourselves still for long. We must keep moving as the fog itself does. It’s not right to keep oneself in place in this perilous smoke.”

Drunen took off behind Jeskun. The royal guard anchored the three of them, staying closely behind the prince. Drunen and his guard struggled at first to keep pace with the Davinian who cut through the fog like a speeding arrow. Onwards they went, into the gripping arms of the fog. As they rode, all they could see was the gray netting of the dank air surrounding them. The further they rode into the fog, the denser and more clotted it became. Mastro Jeskun had to rely on his instincts to navigate through the gray smoke, for he could only see up to a few feet in front of him. His discerning nose had sniffed out the way to the palace, though it became harder for him to keep on the trail with every tree and shadow he passed. The guard struggled to keep on the heels of his prince, and it wouldn’t be long before he would lose his way.

As they galloped their way into the unknown, the unnatural callings of the wild animals kept breaking out of the smoky, cloud-like fog. They were strange noises, nothing that the three men had ever heard before, and that made their flight home even more urgent. Who knew what lay beyond the fog, or what they would encounter? The three men rode for an hour, or so but soon after had to stop, for the fog became thicker than ever, like an overwhelming clump of gray

cotton, and the young mastro began to lose his bearings.

“Are we almost there, Mastro?” the guard asked, feeling claustrophobic.

“Why have we stopped?” Drunen said.

“The fog is beginning to overpower me,” Jeskun said. “It’s like it has a life of its own. Can you not hear it? It breathes.”

The three souls stood silent, listening to the calling of the fog. There was this sort of strange whistling sound, as if the wind encircled them like a slow-moving whirlpool. The wind stopped, and the sound of breathing occupied the air, as if some giant stood inhaling and exhaling above them. The ominous breathing began to manipulate the fog in such a way that it made the smoke move in rhythm with the inhaling and exhaling. The inner edges of the whirlpool of fog began to clear, allowing the three men more room to see what surrounded them.

“Why did the fog open up?” Jeskun said. “This smoke has a funny way about it, like it has life.”

“What do you mean, the fog has life?” the guard asked, spooked. “It can’t be alive.”

“Keep calm, guard,” Drunen said.

“Wait!” the guard said. “I think I hear it—it’s breathing.”

“Nonsense, the fog is not alive,” Drunen said.

“The fog breathes, my prince,” Jeskun said, “but it’s not alive. Something else is. These breaths we hear are from something *inside* the fog. The fog is feeding air, feeding life to it. It’s keeping something alive.”

“Or someone?” Drunen said.

“Possibly,” Jeskun said. “But all this air for a single being seems unlikely.”

“There’s enough breathing around us for an entire army,” the guard said.

Drunen and Jeskun stood like men transformed into stone, and they thought and spoke nothing for a moment.

“My prince?” the guard said, paranoid. “Mastro? What’s the matter?”

With his brows lowered and face tense, like a damp sponge that had been squeezed of all its water, Jeskun closed his eyes to ponder on his dilemma. “Every second that goes by is a second we lose to prepare for what’s to come,” he said. “And what’s most disheartening is that I seem to have lost my way. My men of Bune, I don’t know how to proceed, but nonetheless, we *will* proceed.”

“Then let’s not waste any more time,” Drunen said, turning to his guard to make sure he was still in a sensible state of mind.

“Lead the way,” the guard said, temporarily uplifted by the Davinian’s sense of focus.

But before they could command their horses to break into the wall of fog, they were instantly assaulted by a racket of boom-like tremors, sounding something like an army of horses. The marching of the hoofs enclosed them, bringing fear into the royal guard’s eyes, and he heard a child’s laughter, high and mighty, clearly audible to him, but then it quickly vanished into silence. Yet, alas, the child’s laughter resumed once more.

“Make it stop,” whispered the guard.

“Make what stop?” Drunen said.

“Just make it stop!” the guard said, now becoming overly excited.

“What do you hear?” Jeskun said.

“The laughter!” the guard said, lifting his hands up to his head. “He keeps laughing in my ear!”

“But no one is laughing at you,” Drunen said.

“How can you not hear it?” the guard said. “It’s everywhere!” The guard began to quiver in his saddle, and his heavy-handed movements amplified his nervousness. He reached for his sword but barely could compose himself to pull it out. “Come out, you rotten child!”

“There’s no one in the fog, guard,” Drunen said with force. “At once, steady yourself.”

“I can’t,” the guard said. “I can’t!” And the laugh shot out of the suffocating fog once again, this time for all to hear. “You see? There it blows, in the wind.”

“Yes, I hear it now,” Drunen said.

“Show yourself, child!” Jeskun said.

They heard hoofs rattling about on all sides of them. One in particular had the weight of a thousand men. As the sound of the hoofs came nearer, so did the sound of the child’s laughter. It was a young boy, and he taunted them, throwing off their sense of balance.

“Reveal yourself,” the guard said. “The Davinian master commands you!”

Everything suddenly stopped. It was as if that commandment from the guard seemed to have silenced the boy.

“Davinian you say, okay?” came the voice of the boy in the fog. “Davinians are great meat, so I’m told.” The boy revealed himself to the men. Only his right arm and half of his upper torso

could be seen; the rest was covered discreetly by the fog. The boy's arm and body were covered in armor. The glistening blood-red color of the armor stood out against the backdrop of the muted, indifferent fog. His hand grasped a lance made of ivory and steel, and on his head was a helmet of power, shaped like a pig's face with a square armored plate covering the mouth area. The plate had an elaborate drawing of a giant mouth spread open, like it was consumed by the biggest laughter. The boy laughed, and the mouth-plate slipped inside to the right of his helm, and out of the left side, a new plate, featuring a drawing of a mouth chewing on flesh, moved to the center in its place.

"Davinian, I can smell your meat," the boy said in a more menacing and guttural voice. But the voice turned youthful once more, and he spoke, "If you want to get out of the fog, come follow me. It's simple, okay. It really is." The boy turned around, escaping into the fog.

"No one move," Jeskun said.

"What was that thing?" Drunen said. "Was that really a child?"

"He said we can follow him to get out of the fog," the guard blurted, who was obviously under an enchantment. "He said it to be simple."

"Stay put, guard," Drunen said.

"He can lead us out of here," the guard said.

"Guard, I said stay put!" the prince countered. But it was useless. The boy had put an enchantment on the weak-minded soul, and the guard could not help but heed the boy's calling.

"I'm going!" the guard said.

"No, you've been hexed," Jeskun said. "Don't move. It's too dangerous. There's no simple way out of this fog. Stay with us. Don't be fooled!"

"Come now, come," the guard said as he betrayed his prince's command and leapt into the fog without a care in the world.

"Guard!" Jeskun said, running after him.

"No, Mastro, please!" Drunen begged, aware of the desperateness of the situation. After a brief pause, he followed them both into the fog.

It took some time for the prince to catch up to Jeskun even though the mastro made sure to mark his trail in the fog, slowing his pace down so the prince would eventually reach him. After Jeskun finally sensed Drunen on his heels, he picked up his momentum. The mastro's senses were now sharp, for he had something to hone in on. He could make out the length between him

and the guard, only some thirty yards away, and he concentrated his efforts on reaching him as soon as possible.

The guard himself was in disarray, and it seemed as if he had lost all sense of self-awareness. He had been following the strange boy for some time, acting through a force outside himself. He was being guided, lured by something—and all for a promise of a simple way out of his dilemma.

The guard saw the boy riding straight ahead through the fog on the back of his monstrous horse. And the laugh—he heard that giggling snicker break through the skies of the fog, shooting into his ears like a sharp dagger being thrust into the back of his spine.

“It’s over here, loyal one,” the child said. “We’re almost there. I told you that it’s truly simple. Come follow the child you hear, the laughter in the distance. In the end, we’ll both be laughing, while the rest rot in flesh. Come, loyal one, and find how easy it is to break through the fog.”

Indoctrinated and evoked with warm blood flowing through his veins, the guard advanced his speed, evading the trees he came upon and breaking through the loads of branches that stood in his way. Behind him, the mastro kept pace, and he could hear the child ahead of him luring the guard with his childish charm, adding to the mastro’s sense of urgency. Finally, he heard the child cry out one last time.

“We’re almost there, loyal one!” screamed the beastly child.

Only a few seconds passed before Jeskun and the prince heard an unexpected shriek coming out of the guard’s horse. The pitch of the scream ignited a fierce wind that exploded through the fog and carried the wind past the weary heads of the Davinian and his prince; it was so powerful, that Drunen and Jeskun were almost thrown off their horses. And as if Jeskun’s horse knew much more than its master, it rammed its hoofs on the ground, coming to a sense-numbing halt that once again almost knocked Jeskun off his saddle.

The prince came up on the immovable Jeskun a few seconds later. “What happened, Mastro?” Drunen said while catching his breath.

“Dahkar got spooked, and he dug his legs into the ground,” Jeskun said, stretching his limbs to relieve the discomfort.

“And the guard?” Drunen said. “You heard the yell?”

“Yes, it was his horse,” Jeskun said. “He’s not far.”

“No, he’s not far at all,” the boy said from the faceless fog.

Alarmed, the mastro stiffened up and searched the fog. Instantly, the fog surrounding them lifted up and drew back, revealing a great amount of land in front of them. In the middle of this land was an immense hole dug deep into the ground, measuring a diameter of about fifty feet in length, leading down to a bottomless pit.

Drunen and Jeskun stood upon the edges of the hole with eyes of wonder. Where did this hole come from? It was such a vile thing. Their eyes moved along the depths of its walls. It appeared as if the loose, dark soil across the surface of the hole’s walls began to move, like it was alive. The two men heard breathing, as if a giant beast stood above them, panting down their necks. The stale air grew dense, and their breaths began to languidly drown in foulness.

“What is this darkness?” Drunen said. “It reeks of death!”

Jeskun’s attention was caught by a shadow moving along the edges of the hole. “The guard,” he whispered.

Along the outer edge of the hole, right in front of them, only a few yards away, was the guard, who hung onto the edge of the hole with his legs dangling about into the depths of the abyss. The guard was covered in dirt and mud, except for his eyes, which were big and lively. He stared at his masters.

“My prince?” the guard moaned. “Mastro, please help?” He tried crawling up from the hole himself but did not have the strength to see it through.

Seeing the guard reach out for him, Jeskun jumped from his horse, but as he hit the ground, he heard a strange moaning come from the hole itself, as if a thousand voices were crawling their way up to the guard as he struggled to hang on.

“Reach for me!” Jeskun said.

But it was too late. The guard’s eyes lit up with pain as if something had taken a bite out of him. A second passed, and with force, the guard was dragged into the abyss of the hole, leaving the mastro impotent along the edges of the dark terrain, just mere seconds away from rescuing the guard.

Jeskun stood motionless in the silent fog. Something had caught his attention right after he saw the guard being taken and thrown about like a wooden doll. He saw shapes in human forms beginning to set themselves apart from the dirt-covered walls of the hole, and they began to crawl up the hole to the surface. The closer they got, the more Jeskun could make them out: they

were indeed human, but the front parts of their naked bodies were consumed completely in shadow. He stepped away from the hole and turned to Drunen. “Draw your sword, my prince.”

Jeskun grabbed hold of his vest, tightening it in order to make sure it hugged his torso with enough strength to endure a war. He reached for the twin blades on his back and unsheathed them. He held them up to the fog that had brought them both before this wretched evil.

“Here are Prossesur and Nunsurrum, the twin blades,” Jeskun said. “It would do you well to learn the wrath that comes your way.” He gave the blades a sudden twirl, and the sound of steel split the sky with a scarring noise. The moaning from the human forms intensified, as if torture was being rained down on them.

Alas, the first shadow-covered shape surfaced, and the brightness of its yellow eyes came upon the two men. The creature began to rid itself of the dirt, becoming more humanlike with each passing second, until all that was left was a statuesque vision of a human who was part man and part shadow—and hungry for a fight.

“So this is the army which has come to take the land,” Jeskun said as his fists tightened around the hilts of his blades and anger flamed across the depths of his eyes.

The Fallen Jubahn

THE BOY STOOD STIFFLY LIKE A LIFELESS TOY SOLDIER, ready to test, eager to take the path that would lead him towards his final blade. Luca would finally become a man—no longer a jubahn, but a servantu, a true Davinian, a servant of order, of charity, and of peace in arms. It would be a baptism of the sword, a rebirth for the boy with the wooden leg, and Luca stood standing, patiently waiting for his transformation.

His friends had already tested and passed, the last one being Luleh of Heatheranla, who had just finished with her forms. Luca watched as Siel awarded Luleh her Rasplendur, or seventh blade, that which makes one a Davinian Blademaster. Her new glorious blade gleamed against the rays of the sun peeking in from the never-ending windows adorning the glamorous hall. Luca looked on with admiration.

All of the sixth blades had been called. Luca was the last one to test, and it was to be his turn next. He glanced towards his friends, who stared back at him with smiles matching the excitement in the room, and everyone else in the crowd had their eyes on Luca as well, for they knew that the boy with the wooden leg was about to become a Servantu, something that was truly a remarkable accomplishment. All were excited...all except one.

Luca turned to the black bird on its massive perch and saw it cutting him down with its stare. There was uncertainty in the Mor's eyes, and Prebansa stared at the boy for the longest time, as if it pondered whether it should call Luca's name or not. Young Luca's disposition began to turn, and like a runaway train, thoughts invaded his mind—of his mother, of his wooden leg, and of the beast of a lady that had come to claim him as her own. A cloud of unknown fogged his focus,

and he was unsure of what the future would bring.

And right when he felt most vulnerable, it came: a voice lingering in and out of the invisible.

Luca, sweet boy. Yes, Luca the cripple, listen to us! You can be a sovereign, a king! Come with us to the sunless land!

But then the voice left as quickly as it came. Luca snapped out of his trance and thought nothing of the voice except for something bordering on the imaginary.

At last, the bird let out a scream, and Siel, being the only one to understand the bird's noise, stood up and spoke, "Prince Lucanah bal Bune, you are called to test." Smiles reigned throughout the hall.

Everyone watched as Luca made his way to the ceremonial ring in the middle of the hall. Reaching the center, he stopped and took his stance.

"Begin with your forms," Siel said.

Outside, unexpectedly, thunder crashed against the distant clouds, and everyone in the hall was taken aback by its ferocious timing. Luca found it fitting to begin his first movement on the heels of that bursting sound. His first movement could not have been executed more precisely, and when he turned to complete his second movement, only his focus could have been superior to his skills. And on to the third and to the fourth and the fifth—perfect, perfect, perfect! Luca felt something inside him that he had never felt before, something unseen, something powerful and inhuman, like a brilliant warm light swimming inside his veins.

All of his forms were coming together, and wide grins bloomed across the faces of the souls surrounding him, most especially, his father. As he neared his final movements, it was becoming evident that Luca possessed skills above the average Davinian. He looked to the crowd and saw only their elated stares matching his gaze. He was proud of his achievements and felt happy to finally be rewarded for them.

But then he turned to Prebansa and saw something different. The Mor's eyes were callous, and in them he saw pity. But why? Why did the Mor pity him when everything seemed so right? The Mor turned his eyes away from Luca and set them on the rays of the sun peeking in through one of the corner windows in the hall, but this did not trouble Luca. Only one more form to go.

He took one last breath and executed his final form, and when he started his movement, Luca noticed a difference between his present movement and those that preceded it, for as he was turning his waist and shifting his legs to end up at his last form, something happened, something

incalculable.

Before he heard the *SNAP* of his wooden leg, Luca was well aware he had gone down, for he felt out of balance. And as he fell, to him it was like time had suddenly stopped, and memories of the seven years he had trained day and night passed before his eyes.

As he hit the wooden floor, he was reminded of the Mor's saddened face, and he realized before the crowd could even register what had just happened, that his troubles were far from over and that his journey of sorrow was about to begin. Luca remained lifeless. He had hit the floor hard, and the pains of the impact had begun to set in.

And in those seconds, when Luca was most vulnerable, terror struck with the sound of a familiar voice.

Yes, Luca the cripple, the failure—the fallen Jubahn. You are a beast, a cripple without a leg—a boy without a sword!

Druuk catapulted from his seat, launching towards his only son, but was held back by the king.

“Please, no one tend to him!” Siel said. “We must let him be. He is Davinian, and it is his load to bear. Come to me, Jubahn.”

Druuk contained his emotions as he watched Luca struggle to get up, and after a number of arduous seconds, he witnessed his son finally raise himself to his feet. When Luca felt that he commanded enough balance, he grabbed his broken wooden leg and started on his march towards his headmaster.

Luca did his best to hop along to Siel, but his wounds around his leg and body were making his attempt difficult. Yet, in the midst of all the pain, he managed to keep himself up and walking, at least for a couple of steps. Realizing that the pain was too much to bear, Luca fell for a second time that day.

He lay on the floor, breathing and rubbing his hurt leg. He moaned in pain as he turned over in order to raise himself up on his feet. The hall fell completely silent, and all that was heard was the heavy tapping of that one foot attached to that one strong leg. Luca had never had a problem hopping from place to place with his good leg, but that day, it seemed as if he had never learned to do so.

Only a few feet remained when the boy, who had already fallen twice that day, fell for a third time. A loud *slam* amplified his humiliation, reverberating above the heads of the students who

stood watching with their mouths closed and eyes wide as the sun. It was an uncomfortable moment for all, especially for Druuk, who seemed as if he could bear no more of his son's pain.

"Rise," Siel said. "Rise now, Jubahn! You still have a few steps until you reach me."

Luca tried his best to bring himself up on his one leg, but this time, the pain of his bruises and of his failures were too taxing for him to succeed. He could not accomplish what his master asked of him.

"Raise yourself up, Luca," Siel kept on. "What is the matter, Davinian? Can you not rise to meet your lord and master? You are only a few steps away. Rise! If you do not rise, you cannot come to me. Rise! Use all your strength!"

Luca, desperate to find enough energy to haul himself upright, could not bear to look upon Siel's face.

"Can you not stand up, Luca of the Moon Ire?"

But Luca, after a moment of wisdom, surprised everyone in the hall when he spoke the words, "Not without your help, master." And he reached out his hand to Siel, and everyone breathed in with silent gasps. There was a pause of anticipation.

"Whatsoever you ask of me I shall do," Siel said, extending his benevolent hand to him. "Take my hand, Luca, and let me bring you up to stand with me. Now rise, fallen jubahn."

After raising Luca to his feet, Siel took a step closer to Luca. "Prince Lucanah of Hads, under the rules and regulations set forth by the Order regarding the Ceremony of Testing, I proclaim you a *Fallen Jubahn*, and you'll be subjected to the punishment so prescribed at a later time. Because you broke form, young Luca, regardless of reason, you weren't able to complete the test, thus the proclamation of failure. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Please, Luca of the Moon Ire," Siel said with a heavy heart. "Leave us, and retreat to your home. You won't be awarded your Rasplendur today."

Those words sank deep within Luca's soul, and pain shot from his head down to his toes. He looked to his father, who stood with his head down, leaning against one of the many stone columns, saddened and weak. Then the boy turned to his friends Vehru and Pabru and saw their eyes turn away. The crowd in front of him split in two and opened up a path for him to follow.

Immediately, Luca began his march down the path with that one, desperate foot holding all of his weight, until finally reaching the doors to the hall. But before he opened them, he turned to

his right and saw Lereh meeting his eyes with hers, and suddenly Luca felt worthless, thinking of the words the red-haired beauty had spoken earlier about obtaining his seventh blade to earn her respect. Lereh turned her eyes away from him. *What did I win today except shame and pity?* Defeated, he opened the door and left the room.

When the doors closed, his father, who now had become weak and disoriented, cried out to him, "Son!" But Luca had already gone, failing to hear his father's words. What would happen next would be a surprise to most, for when Druuk let out his moan, blood seemed to spew out of his mouth. He clutched this syrupy liquid with his hands shaking, and a moment passed before his eyes closed and his body dropped to the floor.

Unaware of what had happened to his father, Luca kept on with his lonely march. Ahead of him, he spotted Mastro Vohro standing near a window; he had exited the ceremony hall the minute Luca failed his test. Holding his broken leg in his arms, Luca made the decision to approach his teacher.

Seeing Luca come upon him ignited something inside Vohro that he had not felt in years: nervousness. Reaching his teacher, Luca stopped and paused without saying a word. Vohro noticed that in his left hand Luca carried his broken wooden leg. The shock of seeing Luca holding the leg up forced Vohro's mouth to relax and open, and he exhaled, as if being sucker-punched in the gut. Truly, Luca was there to ask his teacher why the leg had broken if it had been crafted by the great Davinian Mastro. Why did it break at the time when he relied on its strength the most? Was Luca there to forsake, once and for all, the master he had always looked up to?

"Mastro?" Luca said, holding up the leg to him.

"What is it?" Vohro said, his hands softly trembling.

"Thank you," Luca said. "It held up longer than I thought it would. This leg got me through a number of tough times. It was unfortunate that it snapped when it did, but I was expecting it to snap much sooner. This leg was truly crafted by a great master. Take it. I shall return it to you now." Luca raised the leg higher as he urged Vohro to take it from him. Vohro took the leg from the fallen Jubahn, and with nothing more to say, Luca turned around and retreated from him.

Reaching the front of the building, Luca stepped out of the school and into the courtyard. The last thing he expected to greet him was the coldness of the dusk. All day long he had been a friend to the warm sun, but now he was thrust out into the open grayness of the infant night. He felt as if he had been abandoned by the great fireball in the sky, and he could not help but blame

his failure on the matter.

The fallen jubahn stood with his one leg and did his best to keep balance. His eyes were on the gawking crowd who stared back at him as if he demanded their attention. Whispers and gossip played amongst the crowd's lips, and Luca realized it was no mystery that they knew he had just failed; he was now their main attraction. On some other occasion, to be the center of attention would have pleased Luca, but today, it made him feel more like an unnatural miscreation who was set out on display for all to look upon and covertly pity. So with a despondent heart, Luca welcomed the fact that he would not be able to abrogate the stares directed towards him.

He did not blame them; he did not hold anything against the crowd. He had failed, and thought it fair to be gawked at if it was the will of the people of the land. He turned to his far right and saw Sertu waiting by his carriage. Just by her expression, it was obvious she felt Luca's pain. Gertred sat atop on the driver's seat; his stare was up and away, for he could not bear to look into the eyes of his beloved master, for he would surely lose himself in sorrow.

Sertu motioned for Luca to make his way to the carriage so they could get him home with great speed. There was nothing more Sertu wanted to do but to comfort him, feed him, and nurture him.

Luca hopped towards the carriage, and every pounce of that one good leg spoke to the masses staring at him. The sound of that solitary foot bashing into the gravel-covered courtyard was like an ice pick slamming into the ears and hearts of all who stared and heard. Most of the people could not bear the sound, turning their focus on something else.

Once Luca reached the carriage, he was set to go. Sertu met him, holding his worn day-to-day wooden leg for him to put on. Reaching her, Luca stopped and grabbed the leg. Sertu helped Luca secure it to his body.

"There you go, Master Luca," she said as she finished wrapping up the leather strap around the leg. "Come on and get in, dear. We have to hurry." But before letting him in the carriage, she could do nothing but hug him regardless of his general dislike of hugs.

Inside the carriage, he rode onward, silently, like a prisoner being sent to a nameless iron prison. Sertu turned to Luca, and searching the things of his heart, spoke to him. "Don't worry, Master Luca," she said. "Everything you experience has a role in life's cosmic play. It's possible that if you didn't have a false leg you would have passed the test, and you would now be a Servantu, but that's not how life goes about painting its great masterpiece. Some people have

more obstacles to overcome than others, but that's no excuse not to overcome them. Your hardship is not without its reward. But be patient, Master Luca. Please endure."

"Thank you for your kind words, Sertu," Luca said in sullen voice. "But I've already forgotten about my failure. It's time to move on."

"No, Luca," Sertu said. "Never forget. You must always remember. Luca, we are endowed with memories to keep us on the right path—and to forget is to be without memory. There's something evil in forgetfulness. Do understand, young master." Luca just fidgeted in his seat.

By the time the carriage reached the manor, Luca had become restless. He was increasingly becoming more annoyed with his incompetence, and he felt something starting to overwhelm him. At first it came as tears that refused to drop down the hills of his cheeks but stayed swimming in the redness of his eyes. And those tears subsided, and his lips began to tremble, and his hands shook. The sleeping sun, which had just gone to slumber, had one last ray to give to the boy as it shone down his face and across his body, to his leg. He opened the carriage door with force, slamming his mass on the ground so hard that a dust cloud blew all around him. He ran to the manor and barged inside like a cannonball breaking through the strongest of barriers. He rushed up to his room on the second level and quickly locked himself inside.

Once inside his room, he stopped and took a deep breath. The entrapment of the four walls suffocated his mind, and it seemed as if the room started to spin in a haze of insecurity. Earlier he had felt better about his situation, but now that he was alone, darkness overcame him. He was angry, furious that he had failed—that he had been *chosen* to fail. How could he show his face to anyone without being recognized as the *boy who fell*?

Anger consumed him as moments passed. Like a marionette, it spun him around the room. The anger forced Luca to yell out into the open space and kick the things around him. He could not stand the smell of his soul. He reached for his wooden leg and ripped it off, and with the useless block of wood, he began swinging it across the room, making sure it made contact with whatever he could find.

There was a loud crash near his night desk with items flying off the shelves, and he took it to his worktable and slammed it on the surface. He swung it at the paintings he had hanging around the room, and finally, exhausted, Luca threw the wooden leg at the wall with force. But the leg did not break. It ricocheted back to him, landing partly under his bed. Standing now with only one leg, he lost his strength and fell to the floor, making a loud *thump*.

Upon hearing the noise, Sertu, who had been standing outside Luca's door since he had rushed in, knocked with urgency. "Master Luca!" she said. "Master Luca, what was that noise? Master Luca, are you all right? Master Luca, answer me, please?"

Luca did not answer, but just sat in silence. Since the boy refused to acknowledge her, Sertu took her keys and opened the door to his room. Once the door flew open, she saw him on the floor, with the room in disarray.

"Master Luca!" Sertu said as she was about to come into the room, before being stopped by Luca.

"No, Sertu!" Luca said, at first loudly and then in a calmer voice. "I'm all right. Just leave me for now. Do this, please. I'm all better now."

Hesitant to leave him, Sertu heeded her master's plea, but before she closed the door, she spoke what was in her heart. "I love you, my little prince," Sertu said. "And as much as it pains me to say this, I must. Don't run away from your suffering, Luca. Find solace in it." She closed the door.

Luca was left to think on her words, and he breathed a sigh of exhaustion, falling back with his head on the floor. He stared at the ceiling and could think and holler no more. *What did she mean, find solace in it?* Depleted of all energy, he yearned for a good night's sleep.

He made his way to his bed in an attempt to drift into a serene stupor. He would even welcome a nightmare, as long as it kept his mind on things other than his failure as a jubahn. He arranged himself on the bed, placing his eyes on the gritty, crease-burdened ceiling, something he had done for years, especially when he would put his mind on the thoughts of his mother. Though that night, falling asleep would prove harder than he could ever imagine.

Time passed, and lying on his bed, Luca's eyes were fighting the idea of sleep, and they battled his lids to the end as they closed up on them, sealed tight like the earth on a newly buried coffin. Finally, he was free from all thoughts. His failure, his humiliation, his unknown future and his kinship to a beastly woman were all things left behind as he drifted into the land of sleep. His room was now serene.

He breathed steadily, and the wind played outside his window: a frolicking wind, tickled by the meanderings of a clownish moon. A small candle was the only presence providing the warmth of light in a room that was heavy in shadows. The coldness of the oversized bricks crowded the space with darkness, and the tiny candle struggled to keep afloat in a sea of

blackness.

More time passed, and the sleeping boy lay quietly in the comfort of his bed. The silence in the room was disturbed by a sound of creaking noises, like trees moving outside his window as the wind bullied them with arrogance. There was also scraping among the crevices of the bricks, and the room's floor began to crack, as if moving or settling. Soon after, the wind appeared to take an interest in Luca's condition, for it started to make rough sounds, as if circling just in front of his window, and as if the wind conspired with the darkness around, it leapt into the room and flicked the candle to its doom.

All was shadow now, for the voyeur moon, now interested in the wind's foolery, peeked inside and shined a faint light into the center of the room. With the chambers now darkly asthmatic, with no true light breathing throughout the walls except for the wheezing of the moonlight sweeping the floors like a worn broom, the place was ripe for an unwanted visitor. So with no time to spare, evil made its presence known.

The top-right corner brick near Luca's bed trembled, and it rocked and scraped, as if taking a life of its own. It transformed into a familiar object, that of a small cage. And in this cage was shadow, and in the shadow was a horror of a beast, which broke the bars of his confinement. The Nonio, as it was known in the lands of Esterra, vaulted onto Luca's bed, landing softly, breathing a sigh of relief as it failed to wake the boy it would soon turn into shadow.

The Dark Unwelcome

“*HAS THE PRINCE PASSED ON?*” the woman asked with a harsh voice.

“No, not in the least bit,” the royal guard said, confused as to her motives. “Torum, the Davinian Healer, has declared the prince stable for the time being, but he needs rest. May I ask who you are?”

“No need for that,” the muffled voice replied. “I will return soon.”

“I don’t see a problem with that,” the guard said, “as long as he is willing to visit with you.” The man, whose duty was to stand guard outside the prince’s room, seemed wary of the lady’s presence.

“Oh, I’m confident that he’ll have an audience with me,” the lady said as her footsteps were heard first loud and then fading away. “I’ll be coming for everyone soon enough.”

“Strange,” whispered the guard. *What did she mean by that?*

In the meantime, Druuk, who lay sleeping in his designated room at the royal palace, had already been processing the voices in his mind. He flung his head from side to side, battling the temptation to stay asleep, but there was a need for him to wake up. His unconsciousness could sense things afoot, the foulest things, and he was desperate to make the connection with his waking self.

At last his eyes opened, and he quickly realized he had taken ill and passed out. He recognized his room and that he had been sleeping for hours. Nevertheless, he woke up, and not because he intended to, but because the circumstances called for it.

In his sleep, he recognized that mysterious, womanly voice who inquired about his condition,

but as he dreamt and heard the voice, she appeared not as a woman but a beast: tall, inhuman, with dark eyes and long limbs. The beast's hair bathed against the moon; this thing was no friend to the sun.

He blinked his eyes and scanned the room. The prince's chamber was located in the north tower of the royal palace, far above the main levels located to the west of the monumental building. Because it was night, the palace was dark, only sprouting a few hints of light throughout various rooms here and there. Druuk's room had a sturdy lantern sitting atop a table next to the chambers' spacious window. The room was bare except for a slew of books covering Druuk's long and ample study desk. But the room was warm, not just in temperature, but in disposition; its character was warm. Druuk kept it that way. Druuk's strong, virtuous spirit fortified the wellness of the area. He controlled the space around him, seen and unseen.

He sat up. His alert being woke him up for a reason, and now it was time to seek that reason. He closed his eyes and let the wordless movement of the candle come into his mind. Druuk may not have been a Davinian warrior, but he was a master at the discerning of spirits; none other was above him in that respect. He could discern unseen darkness for miles and miles, all around him, from high to low.

Time passed, and what he discerned could terrify the mind of the average person, but not him; he was strong in that manner. The room turned cold; he allowed it to. And his thoughts turned dark; he allowed those as well. From the depths of his being, he reached out into the abyss of space, and there he found strange things; they pricked him, like tiny needles running up and down the length of his back.

Next, he sensed certain noises around him, like *clicks* popping off in various directions, as if there were people walking around him, but every time he turned to one of the noises, it was as if the noises had left that space, as if he had caught whatever was there just as it was leaving. All of the sudden, his thoughts turned to his son, and he silenced the space around him.

Father! The scream pierced through the depths of his thoughts.

Druuk threw off the blankets, quickly putting on his royal garments. Frantic, he searched around the room for something. He looked up and down his shelves and bookcases, but found nothing, and then he remembered, "Ah, yes!"

He unlocked a small drawer located near the bottom of his study desk, taking out a small box covered tightly by a leather string. He put it in his pocket and made an attempt to leave the room,

but not before he was overwhelmed by a whooping cough. He took out a small cloth and put it to his mouth to muffle the sounds. His son was in danger and now was not the time to be bogged down by his illness. *Calm yourself, Druuk.*

He opened the door to his room, and the guard catapulted away from the door and straight into the wall in front of him. Scared senseless, he turned to Druuk, speaking while catching his breath. “You’re awake, my prince. You must have recovered. I didn’t know it would be so quick.”

“Silence, guard,” Druuk said, hushing him with his hand. “No one must know that I’ve awoken. I’ll be stepping out for a moment. I shall return, but until then, no one goes into this room. No one must know I’ve left.”

“But sire—”

“Don’t question me,” Druuk said. “I haven’t the time for it.”

“Yes, my prince.”

“Now, tell me, who was that woman who inquired about me some minutes ago?”

“What woman, sire?”

“*Don’t* waste my time, guard! Regain your wits. I am inquiring about the woman who was here asking to see me.”

“Sire, I know not of any woman. You’ve been asleep here for some hours, and no one has come to visit you except for Torum, who comes by from time to time to check up on you. I swear it to you, sire.”

“Then whose voice did I hear just outside my room?”

“I didn’t hear a voice, my prince. Maybe—”

“What, guard?”

“It could’ve been a dream? You were asleep, weren’t you?”

Druuk took a step aside and pondered. *That woman has invaded my thoughts. I was asleep; I was weak. It will not happen again.*

He turned to his guard. “I’m off,” he said. “Stay put, and remember, don’t let anyone in, not even Torum. No one must know I’ve left. I don’t need anyone coming after me. Tonight is a wicked night. It’s best to stay inside.” He started to move away from the guard but instantly thought of something else, so he approached the guard for the last time. “Be wary; steady your senses. If you hear noises, don’t wonder about them. Keep away from the shadows in the corners

of the tower, and...don't let the fog reach you.”

“What fog do you speak of, sire?” the guard said as he tried his best to get an answer before Druuk made great haste in running away.

After a sturdy effort, Druuk reached the bottom level of the tower and saw that the door that led outside was guarded by two oversized soldiers. Being the prince, Druuk knew if he gave the order, he could easily make his way outside, but his motives needed to remain secret, and thus there was no way that he could use his authority to persuade the guards to let him through...so, he did what he knew best and closed his eyes.

The room turned cold, and the guards began to fidget nervously amongst themselves. “Burr!” one guard said. “I just got a chill.”

“I feel it also,” the other said.

The guards grew more paranoid by the second as Druuk's eyes tightened.

“I'm getting strange feelings inside me,” the first guard said.

“*You're giving me* strange feelings,” the other guard said, forcing himself to walk away from the door and to the window a few yards away. “Stop bringing me into your paranoia.”

“What are you looking at?” the guard said who remained near the door.

“Just wondering about is all,” the guard next to the window said. “Hey, what do you think of this fog?”

“What fog?”

“Come this way. See this fog outside. Looks like it just happened upon us.”

The second guard stepped away from the door and to the window to attend to his friend's curiosity. “What are you complaining about?” the guard said as he neared his friend. Taking a peek out the window, he spotted the nearing fog. “Ah, that *is* odd.”

Druuk knew it was the right moment to make his move, and before the guards could turn around and take their places back at the door, the prince had already come and gone with only the breath of silence to speak of his presence.

Outside, Druuk was alone and vulnerable. No matter. He was not afraid of the dark or of the fog that stood between him and Luca. Druuk's manor was only a few miles from the palace. Many years before, when Druuk first acquired his home, he made sure to build a narrow but obvious trail leading from the palace to his manor. He did this in order for him and his beloved wife, Evie, to make their way from the manor to the palace in the cover of night. He knew the

trail like the back of his hand, and there was no reason for him to be thrown out of his way once he took off in the direction of his home.

He ran between shadows until he reached a small, unguarded stable that kept the horses belonging to the palace's many servants. Druuk untied one of the horses from the long wooden pole that stretched from one end of the stable to the other, and mounted the horse.

For the first fifty yards, he rode quietly, and when he hit the fifty-yard mark, the horse broke into a dazzling display of speed towards a darkened forest. Druuk noticed that he approached the emerging fog slithering towards the dark skies covering the palace, but it did not faze him in the least bit. To him, the fog was a mere nuisance, not an obstacle.

When Druuk had traversed about a hundred yards into the bleak Bunish moors, he came upon the fog, rushing inside of it without the hindrance of fear. He met the gray-infested rolls of smoke engulfing him in all directions with a grin and a steadfast posture. Once consumed by the brutality of the fog, he could not see but ten feet in front of him, so Druuk came to a halt in order to get his bearings.

On the ground, he could make out the gravel-lined path leading to his manor, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep to it within the darkness of the night. Yet, Druuk did not use his eyes to navigate through the fog; he sailed through the forest using a higher sense of direction. He continued with his march into the fog, and Druuk rode with a tremendous pace as he cut through the polluted mist, but something happened that he did not expect; it concerned the path on the ground that he had kept to since he began his trek towards rescuing his son. All at once, the path ceased to exist, and all that remained henceforth was rough terrain, like it had been newly dug up or disturbed. Someone had made an effort to destroy the path. Druuk yanked the reins of his horse, and the creature came to a screeching halt!

Who would do such a thing? He searched high and low, to every corner and space surrounding him. He could not discern using his eyes; the fog made it impossible. He closed his eyes and read the mist of the grayish night. He stood in the voyeuristic gaze of the moon and discerned what encompassed him, seen and unseen. And he knew all things that were and were not, and because he was no fool, he spoke to the wind.

"Come out and face me, disgraceful creature," Druuk said to the darkness around him, but only silence was returned. "Come out! I demand it!"

"What is it with men and their demands?" a voice from the fog said, followed by a childish

cackle.

“Come to me, child of the fog,” Druuk said as he steadied his horse.

“So eager to see,” the child said, speaking with an imperfect grammar. “You are remarkable one, okay. I see why she loved you much.”

Those words, corrupt and illiterate, ran through Druuk like the horns of a bull meeting its target. “What did you say, filthy one?”

“I stated the obvious, master of words,” hissed the child, revealing himself to Druuk. The boy stood on his thunder horse; both the horse and the child were covered in blood-red armor. And the boy’s helmet, that of a pig’s head, was all too shiny and disturbing for the child to be anything but detestable. On the armored plate that covered his mouth was a disgusting grin as if he knew a secret but was unwilling to share it. On the boy’s hands, the stains of blood could be seen covering much of the armor.

“You a master of the written are you not?” the child said, ending with that familiar laugh that earlier during the day haunted his fellow brother, Prince Drunen.

“True. I *am* a scribe of Daví.”

“So tell me, master of scribbly things, all right. What would you write of this moment, with me in front of you? What you scribble on scroll you keep in pocket? Would you tell truth?”

“It would not be worth telling if it were not the truth.”

“And what is truth, Davinian scribbler, okay?”

“That the child on the horse would ultimately be beaten, for the child, though gruesome to behold, was still just a child,” Druuk said. “And you would be kind to address me as Prince Druuk of Hads. You’re in my lands, regardless of what grave you come from.” Druuk, now even more curious about the child’s motives, made an attempt to further inquire about the boy. “But answer me this: Why do you speak in such a poor manner?”

“To ruin language, okay,” the child said, twirling around on his horse, as if excited. “If I corrupt language, no longer will it be beauty, all right. And Man no longer is beautiful. What is language, you see? What else separates Man from beasts? Why not corrupt language? Language is the product of the sun, and I hate, hate, hate the sun! Speak like the barren night!”

“So you’re from the sunless land?” Druuk said with insight.

“There is no such land!” the child said. “The sun cannot be destroyed, but it can be suffocated, and in my land, the sun is no longer in the sky. It’s wherever I wanted to be! I control

the sun, and I shoved it in the deepest crevices known to me.”

“And is this what you’ll do with our land?” Druuk said with the wisdom of a sage.

The boy was caught by surprise by Druuk’s insight, and he became increasingly irritated by the prince’s formidable spirit. “Your questions bore me.”

“Tell me, what do you know of Evehnieh? And why is that blood on your hands?”

The child grinned like a jackal, letting out a drawn-out hissing sigh. “Tsk, tsk, you ask too much of me. No, I ask the questions. Yes, this is *your* land—for now, since there is sun, but soon will not. No matter, what truly troubles me is that you don’t remember me. Don’t you recognize me, prince?”

Upon hearing the child’s words, Druuk forced his horse to take a step back, distancing himself from this strange boy, and he came to a realization. “Look at me, child,” he ordered. “I know who you are. *I* know—and you will not get to Luca, in this life or the next. You are as curved and evil as the beast that birthed you!”

“Now that’s not pleasant” the child said as his horse reared and let out a high-pitched whine.

“Tell me one thing,” Druuk said with authority, “what do you want with the boy?”

“What he is about to be given,” the child replied in a serious, baritone voice. “And you won’t stop us from getting it! What will you do now, wordsman? Will you come chase me? I’d like that, you know. I’ll lead you out of the fog if you like. I’ll lead you straight to Luca, okay?”

“No, child! Your arrogance confines you. Contrary to what you believe, *I* am the master of this fog. Come catch *me* if you can. But you are just a child.” Druuk grabbed his reins and turned to ride away, but not before bellowing out, “and *I* am the authority in this forsaken fog!”

Those last words echoed around the child, sending him into a state of confusion while Druuk disappeared into the fog.

“Come catch me, fool!” the prince yelled from afar.

The child followed, and soon found out that Druuk needed no path or any sort of guide to make his way through the fog-bloated land. When he took after the prince, he could see but only just the horse’s rear and the dust that flew off from beneath its kicking hooves.

“Come catch me, beastly child!” Druuk said as he kept heckling the boy.

The deviled child on his horse could do no more but try to keep up with the master scribe. At first, the child gave out a few large chuckles, but after some time trotting behind the prince, all that was heard coming from the child was laborious breathing, and a few rumbling snorts

escaping the horses' nostrils.

Druuk was in command. He neither cared nor worried about his illness and it showed, for he ordered his horse like a determined warrior in the shadows of the night. It would have seemed that Druuk galloped in an undetermined direction, but he knew where he was going. His mastery of the things around him allowed him to navigate through the muddled illusions of being; his sense of reality was past that of what he saw in front of him, which was just gray smoke, and it reached something much greater, which endowed him with the power to see above everything, to give him a bird's-eye view of things as they truly were. Druuk did not navigate himself through a dense fog, but realized himself from one place to the next, watching from above, knowing from whence he started and where he would end—and where he would end would be next to his manor, but before he did so, he would be right in losing the child in the fog.

The child, who followed Druuk with great success, was still a child, and being so, he was still unfamiliar with the mixing of the seen and unseen. He knew one world with wisdom and the other with ignorance. To know both was to truly know of things, and so even though the savage babe was doing a fine job keeping up with his prey, he knew that he would always be trailing behind as long as Druuk kept on his charge. And so he made a decision, one that would force him to slow his pace and give up the chase. The boy came to the awareness of the prince's earlier prediction that he would not be able to catch the master, and figured he would leave to fight another day, but not before bellowing out a despicable scream. It was the scream of a demon bested by the light within the darkness, so grand of a yell, that it was sure to wake up all that slept in the land of Bune.

Back at the prince's manor, the beast stood on Luca's back, inanimate. The Nonio made sure that everything was calm before proceeding with its intentions. The Nonio was a dastardly creature, about a foot tall and vile in its features. It was humanoid in shape with skin like dark leather, and its skin, especially on its face, seemed to have been stretched and flattened, as to maybe hide its true age. It had a pseudo-boyish face, and its small mouth sported two curved teeth that stretched to its chin. Overgrown muscles were bountiful on its frame with distinctively manicured hands, as if trying to hide its ugliness. On the center of its head was a small horn curving upwards, and the Nonio had unkempt hair, black as night. Its mouth had an abundance of saliva whenever it spoke, and every word that came out of its mouth ended with a fading belch.

And when it moved, one could hear the sighing sounds of the beast, like the soft moans of a newborn baby enjoying the warmth of its mother's milk. The beast's tiny arms were spread out as if it was balancing itself on some type of log that was spread across a deep ravine, and it took its first few steps as soft as those of an assassin's.

Once the Nonio reached the top of Luca's back, it sat down with his legs spread in a split; the creature was quite nimble. From its belt, which was fastened around one of its legs, the Nonio took out a small, curved dagger and a pouch with some sort of liquid in it. It took the dagger and made a slit on Luca's undershirt, so as to gain access to his skin. Next, it took the tip of the dagger and used it to make a small incision on the boy's skin, so as to draw a good bit of blood. The blood began to spill out, and the Nonio could not resist but lick its two saber teeth in anticipation.

But the beast was not there to lick the blood or even suck it out of Luca. No, it was there to taint it with the poison it had brought. Once the Nonio saw that it had enough blood drawn from his victim, it took his dagger and dipped it in the solution it was holding in the small pouch. It put the dagger to its mouth and mumbled some inaudible words to itself, probably an old Esterran language of chanting, the type only used by dastardly beings.

After it had chanted a number of unclean words, it raised the dagger up and readied itself to thrust it into Luca. Little did it know that things were not to go as it had planned, for another visitor had reached Luca's chambers, a visitor surely there to thwart the Nonio's plans. The Nonio turned to its left and saw something it had not anticipated.

A large hound sat on the windowsill with its huge blue eyes staring back at the beast.

The Nonio was baffled. *Why is this dumb creature looking at me? What business is it of this thing what I do to this child?* The Nonio remained calm at first, but knowing that the animal was larger than itself and endowed with sharp claws and pointy teeth, after some time, it became cautious. The Nonio waved its hand at the striking animal, as if to say *shoo, shoo*, but nothing happened, and the hound just kept staring at the wrinkled beast. Alas, the Nonio became fed up.

"Scram!" the Nonio whispered, ending with a gross belch. And now louder, "Scram!" Luca moved in his bed but did not wake. "What is wrong with you, stupid beast? Can you not see that I'm busy? Leave us be!"

But the hound was not going anywhere. The Nonio leapt off Luca's back and onto the side of the bed. It reached for Luca's wooden leg just underneath the bed and took it and threw it at the

dark hound. Instantly, the hound's mouth grew wide and took the wooden leg into its mouth, swallowing the leg whole. A few seconds passed, and the hound gave the Nonio a sly grin.

"What did you do!" the Nonio said with the echoes of belches ruining the sound of language. "You can't just go around eating people's wooden things. What are you?" The Nonio sat cross-legged on the side of the bed, putting its head on its fist to ponder for some time. *I've never seen anything like you before. No dog has ever swallowed a wooden leg as long as I've existed. You're a strange dog, yes you are. Or are you a dog at all? You're certainly much bigger.*

The Nonio snapped his fingers. "You're not a dog at all, are you? What do you want from me? Tell me, now!"

The hound stood quietly amongst the backdrop of the moon. It licked its chops like most dogs do, but after a passing moment, the hound's eyes began to shake, and the Nonio saw, or felt, that is, that something brewed inside the hound, something terrible and magnificent.

The Nonio sensed that the being in front of him was no ordinary animal but something abnormal. The beast stood up, raising his dagger to the animal. "I have come for the child," it said, and as if it was listening to the hound talking to him inside its head, the Nonio replied to it, "No, he's not yours. You cannot stop what's coming."

The Nonio shuffled back on top of Luca's back, and the boy fidgeted some more. "He's mine," the Nonio insisted. "His blood will be fully tainted like it was meant to be, and he will be shadow, and there'll be no hope. The sun *will* die."

The hound spoke to the Nonio once more in its thoughts.

"No, he was born of the night! You're wrong." And reacting fiercely to the animal's last words, the Nonio's eyes increased in size due to the rush of fear that had come over it. "You're what?" it said. "It can't be. You're not real. *You* are not supposed to be real!"

As a response, the hound opened a small slit of its mouth, and a gust of wind blew like a hurricane against the beast's small mass. "I am as real as you!" spoke the hound with a giant's voice.

The Nonio jumped back, scared out of its wits, and it retreated back to its cage up on the corner of the wall. Closing the gate, the beast pointed its dagger out between two of the bars. "I will kill you!"

Finally, the beast disappeared into the wall, and the room that was home to the fallen Jubahn breathed once again with a sense of tranquility around its space.

The evil had been vanquished, and now it was time to be rid of the shadows as well. The hound sitting on the windowsill blinked its eyes, and all the candles in the room came to life, and the room was bright once more. The warmth of the flames would keep the sleeping boy protected for the time being. After this, the hound disappeared into the grayness of the night.

All of this had transpired, yet Luca had failed to wake. Moments later, when all was quiet after the dangerous confrontation between the Nonio and the hound, Druuk burst inside Luca's chambers. He darted to his boy's bedside and saw that he was still asleep, so he let him be for the moment. He discerned the space around him and knew that something had occurred. He waved his hand back and forth a few inches above his son's body, and he put the hand to his nose and took in a great whiff.

"Nonio," Druuk said with an aggravated scowl.

He discerned the space some more and was led to the windowsill. He poked his head out and surveyed the land below and around the manor. All was dark and peaceful. He put his nose closer to the windowsill and slowly took in the unseen scent. "Smells like dog," he said with lively eyes. *I wonder.* Druuk stood in the stillness of his snoozing son, and he thought for a moment. *It's time.*

He turned to the window and peeked out, making sure no one was around. With a wave of his fingers he silenced all the candles in the room, and they all flicked off into the darkness. Only the moon and shadows remained. Druuk did this not because he wanted to extinguish the light, but he knew that they needed to escape in the cover of darkness.

"Son?" he spoke. "Wake."

Luca snapped his eyes open, and with a sluggish way about him, sat up and made a great effort in focusing on the mass standing before him. "Father?"

"Yes, son," Druuk said. "I've awoken you from your sleep."

Luca stood up to meet his father and immediately felt shame for his failure earlier that day. Druuk felt his suffering, and he embraced him like only a father would.

"Are you ashamed of me, Father?"

"Absolutely not!" Druuk replied. "You did the best that you could do, and you stood in the aftermath of your failure like a true Davinian. You *will* earn your Rasplendur someday—but not yet. Now, go and get dressed. Where is your leg?"

"My leg?" Luca said thinking. He looked under the bed but saw nothing.

“There it is,” Druuk said, spotting the wooden leg leaning against the wall just underneath the windowsill. “Strange, I don’t remember seeing it there. No matter. Put it on, quickly.”

Luca was just as dumbfounded as he stared at his wooden leg neatly leaning against the wall. But he needed to get dressed, so he thought about it no longer and got up to retrieve it. After he fastened the leg to his body and put on all of his garments, he was ready to go.

“Where are we going?” he said.

“Luca, we must go into the darkness. I need to show you something. Stay close to me.”

“Lead the way, Father.”

A Sneak in the Night

ABOUT A HUNDRED YARDS AWAY FROM LUCA'S MANOR STOOD the quiet home of his friend, Vehru. The manor itself was peaceful. The bridge to the gates had been drawn up, and the leaves of the surrounding trees had calmed themselves into a serene stupor. On the second level, inside the master chamber, Vohro paced in an erratic manner.

“Why must you carry this weight on your shoulders?” his wife, Ela, said. She was a tall, warrior-like beauty, and pale-skinned with long, blue-black hair and sky-blue eyes.

“I didn’t put it there,” Vohro said. “The weight abruptly dropped on me, but I fear the young Jubahn suffered the worst of it. My suffering is nothing compared to his. The leg I crafted was never meant to break.”

“All things of this world are meant to break,” Ela said. “There’s no need in destroying yourself. You did all that you could have. The leg lasted for many years. Things happen the way they are meant to happen. Let it go.”

Vohro sat down, staring at the quiet candles shining their shadows on the stone walls. In his hand, he held the broken wooden leg he had crafted for Luca, whom he loved like a son. Frustrated, he let it drop to the floor, making an obtrusive noise as it broke the peace surrounding his chambers. He took off his mastro’s *ren*, throwing it on the bed. The mastro appeared ragged, as if overworked.

“Put your blades up and come to bed,” Ela said. “Your day’s been long, and your night will be short. Be smart and get some rest.”

“I need some ale,” Vohro said, placing his blades against the wall.

“You need sleep, now come.”

Heeding her wishes, Vohro put himself to bed and flipped the candles off with a flick of his wrist. Darkness reigned.

Now the only sign of life came from Vehru’s room, which appeared to have been kept alive by a solitary candle; it was constantly flickering back and forth from side to side, as if restless, bullied by an unseen force.

Vehru sat cross-legged atop his bed with his head down and eyes closed. He appeared to be in deep thought, as if feeling out his room’s space. He had learned a thing or two about the discernment of spirits from his father, but he was still immature in the practice of it. Vehru knew that his father was proficient in manipulating the wind to such an extent that he could force the wind to blow in certain directions, especially when commanding it to blow out candles at the snap of a wrist.

Vehru tightened his eyes. He opened up his right hand and calmly felt the air around it. He raised his head and stared at the candle, and with great confidence, he pushed his hand in a forward motion towards the candle, closing it quickly. The candle reacted by wavering, as if being struck in the face by a bully. *Keep practicing, Vehru.*

Just then his attention was caught by something strangely familiar to him. Vehru felt compressed by a power, like being constrained by a cage. He had felt this feeling before—quite a number of times, actually, and Vehru smiled; he always knew when one of his friends approached.

“I know you’re there,” Vehru said, stretching his neck to relieve the pressure he was putting on the muscles on his back by sitting the way he was.

There was no answer.

“Come on, Pabru,” Vehru said, close to losing his patience. He heard a snicker and a howl linger in the air. *What is he doing?* “Are you just going to hang from my window all night?”

“Perhaps.”

“What point are you trying to make by not coming in?” Vehru said, his irritation increasing.

“I didn’t realize how spent I was until I tried to climb up this wall. I might be stuck. I can’t pull myself up. I think it’s funny that I can’t pull myself up, is all.”

“I don’t know if you’re being serious, or not. You’d better not be lying.” A moment passed. “Pabru?”

“I might need your help.”

Vehru rushed to help his friend. He poked out the window and saw Pabru dangling from the ledge, looking up at him. He grabbed Pabru’s arms and pulled him inside. “Excellent work, Pabru,” he said. “You are the epitome of a Davinian Servantu.”

“Don’t ever forget it,” Pabru said, falling to the floor, exhausted.

“Excuse me!” Vehru heard from outside.

Who in the world is that?

He poked his head out the window once more and saw a splendor of golden freckles.

“A helping hand would do, please,” Luleh called, stretching out her arm. Her sister trailed behind.

Tripping over himself, Vehru did his best to help the sisters inside. “I didn’t see you guys there. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, well, we’re not the least bit surprised,” Lereh said as she straightened her garments out.

“Quiet, sister,” Luleh said.

“Get up, Pabru,” Vehru said as he walked backed to his bed and plopped his mass on it once again. “What are you guys doing here?”

“We came here to get you,” Pabru said after sitting up, “but I didn’t know it was going to drain all of my energy coming here. You’re just a few hundred yards away from my house, but we had to run through part of this fog that just crept up on us. I almost lost my way.”

“I have to admit,” Luleh said, today has been an eventful day.” Lereh and Vehru just kind of nodded in agreement.

“So, what do you want me for?” Vehru got to the point.

“We’re heading out,” Luleh said.

“Heading out?” Vehru said. “Where to?”

“Where I found this,” Pabru said, holding up his hand and opening it. A shiny metal ball linked to a chain fell from his palm, and he dangled it in front of Vehru’s face to make sure he could make it out.

“That’s the ball you showed Luca and me earlier, isn’t it?” Vehru said.

“The same one indeed, *and* we’re going to go find some more of this metal.”

“Now?” Vehru said. “For what?”

“Pabru mentioned something about crafting Luca a new leg,” Luleh said. “At first, I didn’t

believe him, but then he showed me the ball he made. He asked us to help, and well...we know the land better than you guys, so we thought we could lend a hand. It shouldn't take long."

"It better not," Lereh added. "I was looking forward to burying myself in books all night long."

"You didn't have to come," Luleh said.

"And who'd watch over you?" Lereh said, shoving her sister on the shoulder while she made her way to the pantry.

"Stop," Luleh whined.

"But can anyone craft a leg out of metal?" interjected Vehru.

"I'm sure the Davinian smithy would be more than happy to attempt it," Pabru said as he followed Lereh to the small bedroom pantry.

Lereh reached for the pantry doors and opened them, and what she saw in there made her face as pale as a ghost.

"Good evening, freckles," a small little creature said, who was balancing itself on the wall with its tiny arm.

"Ah!" Lereh said as she abruptly backed away from the little creature inside the pantry.

"Out of my way, Penn," Pabru said, shoving the creature to the side. "Is there anything good in here?"

Penn crossed his arms. The little creature had the appearance of a fox yet stood on two legs instead of four. His limbs were human-like with the exception of his paws. His fur was all white, and he had a squirrel's tail reaching all the way to his head. On his face was a black spot like a mask, something like a raccoon, and most noticeably was the orange spiky hair blazing down the center of his head. He jumped down to the floor.

"What is that?" Lereh said, backing away as if disgusted.

"I don't know exactly what it is," Vehru said. "It's just *Penn*."

"Not much of a presentation, little master," Penn said.

"Sorry about that," Vehru said, picking the little creature up and placing it on the bed next to himself. "Penn was my mother's pet growing up, and now he's mine."

"I've never seen anything like him," Luleh said, amazed.

"And I've never seen anything like you before, with your fire hair and all," Penn said, stroking his own spiky hair. "We might be kin, freckles."

“Um, not likely,” Lereh said, disdainfully. “And don’t call me *‘freckles.’*”

“But I *love* your freckles,” Penn said. “They remind me of someone I knew a long time ago who had freckles, but hers were green.”

“Green?” Luleh said. “Odd.”

“Yes, well, anyway,” Penn said. “That’s a story for a different occasion.”

“Thank goodness,” mumbled Lereh.

“So, where are we going again?” Penn said.

“*You’re* not going anywhere, little friend,” Vehru said. “Neither am I; not now, at least. We can’t go out in this darkness. We’d have to wait until morning.”

“Nonsense,” Lereh said. “The lake is but a mile from here.”

“Still, we’re without our stamina, and it’s clear that the night seems strange,” Vehru said. “It would be foolish to step out into that fog.”

“But it would be adventurous,” Luleh said. “You are a Davinian are you not? What’s the big fuss? Let’s just go and get it over with.”

“Yes, I *am* a Davinian, thus why I choose to stay in the comfort of my room for now,” Vehru said.

Pabru walked over to Vehru’s night desk and took hold of a jug of water. He placed the jug up to his mouth.

“Use a cup,” Vehru said. “You’re a pig.”

Pabru agreed with a loud belch. “Get dressed, Vehru,” he said. “I want to make it to this place before we get ensnared by the creeping fog. As Luleh said, the lake is about a mile from here, so it shouldn’t be a hassle to reach it. But that fog gives me the shakes.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I *won’t* be going out.”

“Vehru,” Lereh began, “you and I both know that Luca is now a fallen jubahn. Do you remember the punishment for that?”

Vehru pondered on the matter for a second. “Exile,” he murmured reluctantly.

“Correct,” Pabru said. “So, I thought about this a great deal, and I figured that if we were going to retrieve the metal, we would have to do it tonight, for Luca could be exiled at any time, even come morning. If he does go, I’d feel much better if he had a strong, durable leg to aid him on his journey.”

Vehru stepped up to the window to take a look at the gray smoke that crawled along the

horizon at an accelerated rate. Something in his being went off like a light, and he began to have reservations about going off into the night.

“I almost forgot about the punishment,” Vehru said. “But like you said, we have no choice. It would be nice for him that have that leg, if, like you said, it can be crafted. Okay, then, let’s get this metal for Luca.” Vehru turned to his friends and noticed something about them. “Wait, you guys didn’t bring your blades?”

“Why is that surprising?” Lereh said, “I can’t wear my blades, and neither can you, or have you forgotten you are not of age to sneak out at night? Only adults are allowed to wander about in the moon ire. It’s forbidden for us to sneak out, and just as forbidden for us to wield our blades while doing so. The punishment for our meandering at night is not severe, but if we get caught wielding our blades when it’s prohibited, we’ll surely be expelled.”

“Well, if I am going to break this rule, then I am going to do it to the hundredth degree, and that would include wearing my vest *and* my blades.”

“But you *won’t* need them,” Pabru said, annoyed. “It’s bad enough we’re sneaking out. Your stubbornness is going to get us expelled from the Order.”

“You don’t understand,” Vehru said. “It’s not stubbornness, it’s a feeling deep inside...to not be stupid!” Vehru walked up to his wardrobe. “Did you bring anything at all with you?”

“I brought a pickaxe and shovel for the metal, and a small cart,” Pabru said. “It’s all outside waiting for us.”

“Very well, Pabru, but never leave your vest when you’re sneaking about, especially in the moon ire, whether you’re breaking a rule or not. Got it? There is *breaking a rule*, and there is *being smart*. A good person knows how to discern between the two.”

“Yes, *Servantu* Vehru,” Luleh said with a genuine smile.

“I like hearing that,” Vehru said, mirroring Luleh’s smile. He reached for his vest, which was resting on a wooden mannequin. He put it on, making sure to fasten it on securely. He moved up to his wall and grabbed his blades.

“No,” Lereh stopped him. “You must leave your Rasplendur where it is. You haven’t been ordained a *Servantu* yet, so you may have a Rasplendur, but you cannot wield it. You know this.”

She was right; wielding a Rasplendur without authority was leagues beyond sneaking out at night or donning the blades when prohibited. It was sacred. “You’re right, Lereh,” Vehru said. Thus, he left his long blade resting on the wall.

After putting on his vest and blades, Vehru moved to his wardrobe, pulling out a number of garments.

“Here, wear this,” Vehru said, throwing some things to his friends. It was a full set of Davinian clothes that he had constructed: hats, rens, shirts and pants, and even the soft sandals were all the shade of midnight. “These garments will help us marry the night. Put them on quickly.”

Vehru approached the window. “Should I get a rope, or are you guys well with climbing down to the ground?”

“A rope will do,” Pabru said.

“Just as well,” Vehru said. He grabbed a rope and threw it out the window and onto the ground.

“Take care of yourself, little master,” Penn said, jumping on the window ledge. “Don’t take too long, or I’ll have to come looking for you.”

“Don’t worry about me, Penn,” Vehru said, petting his little friend on the head. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

The four Davinians climbed down on top of the moist grass and made their way to the cart.

“What direction is the lake?” Luleh said.

“Towards the fog,” Pabru said.

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” Lereh said. “We’ll take turns pushing the cart. You go first, Pabru.”

“Figures” Pabru said, reluctantly positioning himself behind the cart. “Let’s go, everyone.”

The Davinians marched on through the darkened terrain even though they lacked most of their energy at first, but the thought of being able to craft a sturdy metal leg for their friend fueled their efforts, and the fear of losing the opportunity to do so guided them through the night with a single, solid purpose.

After they had traveled for half a mile or so, they came upon the fog lingering near the outskirts of Loshendu Forest. The smoke was dense and cumbersome; any closer to the ground and the fog would be rolling across the terrain. Not surprisingly, the Davinians blended in with the mist, for they were in disguise of the night, and once they entered the fog, it was as if they became the fog.

Breaking into the forest, the four were caught in wonder as they ogled at the sullen, towering

trees up above. It was not uncommon for the tree branches to overlap, stretch and intertwine amongst themselves, as if the towering elms were reaching out to each other and grappling roughly with their limbs, as if in some sort of quarrel. It was for this reason that an elder scribe many years ago named it “Loshendu Forest”, or the fighting forest, for it reminded him of walking amongst a never-ending brawl of bark and leaves, as if one had just entered an eternal battle that had been waging on since before mankind.

The young Davinians kept progressing under the ire of the silver moon. With only half a mile to go, their pace slowed down, as the fog was becoming a troublesome burden. Vehru had relieved his friend with pushing the carriage, and Pabru took a guard’s position behind his friend, while the Flowers trailed them a few feet behind.

Vehru’s pace slowly decreased by the minute; he became distrustful of the gray mist. They had traveled about a quarter mile, with only another quarter remaining before reaching the lake. All four of them wondered what things thrived in the shadows of the smoke. They couldn’t sense anything, but they feared it was just the lack of skill in doing so. Moreover, the group also knew that they were camouflaged, and it would take great skill for someone or something to spot them moving through the muddled terrain.

And they were correct in thinking this way—it *would* take a large amount of skill to do so, and the dark thing that had been stalking them since the beginning had such the skill. Unbeknownst to them, a creature lingered among the pockets of dense, cloud-like mass hovering across the forest ground; it trailed them with a predator’s sensitivity. The being left light tracks on the soft dirt, tracks that seemed to match the ones Jeskun had found earlier that day.

Up ahead, the four souls carried onward. They kept silent, and their movement was like a panther treading softly amongst the leaves, blending in with the obscurity of the night.

“I know something is out here, around us,” Vehru observed nervously. “I just don’t know what it is or if it’s even a threat.”

“I feel it too,” Lereh said. “We can hide with the fog, or we can proceed.”

“We’ll proceed,” Vehru said, pushing the cart. “Keep always on the move under an angry moon, especially in a fog.”

The four young Davinians crossed the last part of their journey, exiting the forest and stopping about twenty yards away from the edges of the lake. The four knew why they had stopped, and so speaking to each other would have been useless. They remained like statues in

the fog so they could focus on the noises of the night.

A fluttering of soft thuds began to sound off in every direction around the group. The thuds grew louder, sounding more like footsteps in the dank, fog-stained grass. It became apparent to the Davinians that these things making the noises had no clue of their presence, and following some tense moments, the movement of the mysterious beings ceased, and the Davinians finally felt the threat dissipate.

“Let’s move, quickly,” Lereh said.

“What do you think it was?” her sister replied.

“They sounded like humans, but they didn’t breathe like them,” Vehru said.

“So they weren’t *really* human?” Luleh said.

“I guess,” Vehru said as he picked up his pace. “What would masquerade itself in such a manner?”

“I don’t know, but we could find out,” Pabru said.

“Stay focused, Pabru,” Lereh said.

After a tense few minutes, the Davinians reached the much-anticipated lake. Oddly, the lake seemed to be immune from the engrossing fog, as if an invisible shield had been constructed around the edges of the water. In fact, the lake was clear of any blemish, and the water was pure and fresh. Far above the lake breathed the starry night, and the reflective pool of water made the stars seem to come down and prance along the surface of the water.

The group stood near the outer banks and reveled in its transforming charm; the calming water had somehow succeeded in curing them of all their fears. On the opposite side of the lake, on its sloped bank, was the metal they sought. Its illustrious qualities cut through the darkness around the lake, and so it was fairly simple for Pabru to point his finger in the right direction. “Right over there on the other side,” he said. “Are you up for a swim?”

“Not in the least bit, but we better get this over with,” Vehru replied.

So the four went into the water, clothes, blades and all. They even brought the cart, which Pabru had improved by having it convert into a small wooden raft, big enough to carry the extra pounds of metal and dirt but too small to actually carry the four across the water. As the Davinians swam, they all felt light as a feather, and it was as if all of their strokes were made by powerful giants, for they were propelled across the lake at a rapid rate. To Vehru it seemed as if there was a current steadily moving them along to their destination; the lake wanted them to

reach the metal.

Once on the other side, Pabru pulled the raft up, picked up the ax and made his way to a pile of rubble on the ground.

“See?” Pabru said as he pointed to the mounds of rubble appearing to have been sprinkled with metallic dust. “It’s right where I found it last time.”

“I see that,” Vehru said. “Good job. Now let us be prompt, so we can return safely to our homes.”

“Agreed,” Pabru said. “Grab the raft while I make the first strike.”

But this was something that Vehru would soon find he could not do, for the raft they had brought with them was now drifting back to the other side of the lake from which it came from. Vehru had quickly come to learn that the raft was not just drifting away from them, but being pulled by something.

A dark figure stood at the other end of the lake; it had somehow stealthily snatched a hook on a small part of the raft before the four young ones had even begun to cross the lake. The dark thing had stolen the raft underneath their noses.

“Everyone?” Vehru said in an alarmed state. “Turn around.”

They turned to the dark figure at the other end of the lake. But instead of being consumed by fear, all four became angry. Pabru raised his pickaxe and held it in a defensive position while approaching the edge of the lake.

“Who goes there?” Pabru said, angrily, but the dark being, who now seemed to have the shape of a man in dark clothing, did not answer.

The man pulled the raft up to the shore and set it a few feet away from where he stood. He turned to the young students and mockingly raised his hand to them.

“You’ll have your raft, Davinian slaves, but to do *that* you must cross the lake. Will you cross the lake? I do hope that you come and meet me here. I shall like a duel with you. Come and cross the lake, servants of fools.”

“A duel?” Lereh fumed with eyes of a fierce lioness. “He wants a challenge?” Then she realized something terrible. “I don’t have my blades, Vehru. None of us do. Well—”

Vehru, who had already figured out he was to be the one to cross the lake, spoke to his friends, “I know that you’re without your blades. It’s a good thing that I have mine.” He said this as a reprimand.

“But wait,” Pabru said. “Who is he? Do we really have to meet the challenge? If he’s a master, we can’t defeat him. We can take off; he’d have to cross the lake to catch us.”

“He’ll reach us sooner or later, Pabru. I sense he’s Davinian. We must meet the challenge. We can’t retreat. Remember, it is unbecoming of a Davinian to not rise to a duel from something as dark as this...warrior.”

“You don’t have your Rasplendur,” Luleh said.

“The others will have to do,” Vehru said.

“What say thee, young slaves?” the dark man said. “Will you not meet the challenge? Sooner or later, we’ll have to cross blades.”

“I’ll go,” Vehru said, taking his ren off. “You guys stay here and pick away at the metal. There’s no point in running away from something we can’t avoid.”

“Ha!” Lereh said. “Do you really think you’ll be crossing the lake alone? How noble of you. But this meat is mine to carve. Award me one of your blades, Davinian, and I’ll go with you to the other side.”

“And me too,” Luleh said.

“No, Sister,” Lereh said. “You’ll stay here with Pabru and mine for the metal. You’ll protect him.”

“Hey! I don’t need protection!”

“Be quiet, Pabru,” Vehru said. He turned to Lereh and took out his Nunsurrum blade. “So that you would honor me,” he said as he raised the blade to the Flower.

“I accept the honor,” Lereh said, and thus Vehru awarded her with his blade to wield. He turned to Pabru. “Pick as much as you can carry. Something tells me these waters will help you carry as much as you please. Do it. I’ll try to hold him off as long as I can. I leave this for you.”

Vehru took out the blade from his right chest, his Trunu, and threw it at the ground, making it stick. “Honor me, friend. Use this to defend yourself,” Vehru said. “If I fail and fall, you must follow and do the same as I do.”

“You won’t fail.”

“Keep picking away no matter what you hear or see,” Vehru said, extending his hand to his friend.

“Don’t worry about me,” Pabru said as he embraced his hand.

The boys said their goodbyes while the sisters embraced and said theirs. It was time for them

to separate—for the time being, so they hoped. Vehru and Lereh made their way to the lake, dunking themselves into the cool water.

“Only two will come?” the dark Davinian mocked.

“Only two shall do,” Vehru replied as he swam in defiance. Vehru dipped himself in the crisp water while Pabru looked on.

The man waiting at the other end reached for one of the blades located on his left gauntlet. It was a dark and curved blade, an abomination of steel. “This is for your arrogance, young Davinian.”

He threw the blade across the water with such speed that it was heard but not seen. The blade came at Vehru with force, and it cut him above the right ear, just enough to make him cry out in a shrill scream.

“A taste of what is to come, my young friend,” the man said.

What the dark creature was not aware of was the power behind the young Davinian’s scream; it reached far above the space surrounding the lake and flew into the night up above the perilous fog. It rode the surface of the moon and skipped along the all-embracing stars, until it came into the thoughts of one man.

And his eyes awoke from their slumber.

Pictures in a Cave

A FEW MILES OUT FROM PRINCE DRUUK'S MANOR, ACROSS the starlit *Plains of the Moon*, the distant horizon dissolved into the dark greens of the sloping hills. No living thing abounded, and there existed no black forms of shadow hovering along the plains, tiptoeing up and down the points of the dampened grass. Yet, one thing did breathe in the faraway landscape: a glowing fire, splitting the horizon in two, breaking apart the marriage of the lowly and the high. It glowed in the dark like the surface of a burning anvil, a flaming orange contrasting the blue-black stains of shadowland stretching for miles along the surface of the spectral terrain.

The fire that burned the starry landscape came from a torch held by a young boy as his father raced down the plains towards the unknown. Even though the wind had conspired against them, it failed to extinguish the light they carried, as if the fire was something eternal, transcendent, only answering to an infinite power.

Luca and Druuk had successfully traversed miles of terrain, heading towards a destination that only the elder prince had knowledge of. On the back of a thunderous horse, father and son flew with unnatural speed until they came upon the place which they sought, something strange and inconspicuous placed beneath a patch of lonely trees. It was a hole in the ground, and inside were stairs leading down to a darkened abyss.

Upon their arrival, the two princes dismounted their horse and made their way towards the stairs.

“Where are we, Father?” Luca said.

Druuk kept silent, looking in every direction; he had sensed something, a lingering dark

presence. After a moment, he continued on. Nothing but long stretches of low-level grass surrounded the hole before them. His garments were being tussled about by a turbulent wind, and the surrounding sky seemed to be watching him, especially by that round cosmic vagrant lighting up the sky, floating in the distance, sporting a round belly, as if full from eating the hopes of many men.

“What is this place?” Luca inquired once more.

With a sullen face, the prince turned to his son. “This is your mother’s cave,” he said.

“My mother? Her cave?”

“It’s where I first found her. She was keeping shelter here. I came upon the cave during one of my reckless meanderings, intent on discovering new things and exploring new terrain.”

“You discovered her,” Luca repeated, baffled.

“Yes, I sure did. She had been hiding here for a while, with no family, with nowhere to go.”

“You never told me you found Mother in a cave.”

“I’ve kept lots of things from you, Son,” Druuk said, motioning for him to step into the abyss. “Come, let’s descend. Hand me the torch and grab on to me.” Luca handed his father the torch, which was close to being put out by the bullying wind. He grabbed hold of his father, and they progressed down the stairs leading inside.

“I haven’t been back to this cave since your mother’s death,” Druuk said with a slight discomfort.

“Why not?” Luca said, trying not slip among the moist dirt.

“I had no reason to,” Druuk said, lighting the way with the torch that had grown stronger.

“And now?”

“Now, we are running out of time...*I* am running out of time.”

Once they reached the last step, they stood at the entrance to the cave for a brief moment while Druuk swayed the torch back and forth to get a good look inside.

“Help me find a place to put the torch,” Druuk said as he scoured the walls of the cave.

“Here’s one,” Luca said, finding a spot perfectly placed near the top-left corner of the entrance.

When Druuk placed the torch on the iron bracket mounted on the wall, the cave magically lit up with life, revealing much of its inner space. The cave itself was made up of a front room and a deep back room thirty feet from the entrance. Lining the walls of the cave were a number of

clothes, blankets, used torches and writing tools. In the middle of the cave was a long, wooden table covered in thick patches of dirt, and a certain number of books lay neatly on top. On both the left and right walls of the front room, there was a giant mural, revealing a cosmic display of planets and stars.

Druuk stood idly, surveying the room. “Someone’s been here,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“This is not how I left the cave many years ago,” Druuk said, walking further in. “This painting wasn’t as immense as it is now.”

“Who would have come here?” Luca said as he followed, keeping his eyes on the expansive mural.

“I would love to know the answer to that, Son,” Druuk said, short and dry, as if he knew quite well who the person was.

“So how long did Mother live here?” Luca said.

“Only a few months,” Druuk said. “She didn’t tell me exactly where she came from; I didn’t care to ask. I loved her from the minute I found her. But she did say she’d wandered off from her homeland and had gotten lost. She had strayed so far that it would have been impossible to return. When I brought her back to the manor, she stayed in one of our rooms, and then...we fell in love.”

They came upon the table with the books. “Were those my mother’s?” Luca said, running his finger over them.

“That’s a good question,” Druuk said, inspecting them. “I didn’t leave these here.” He read the first book. “This one speaks of dark things.” He read some of the second book. “Yet, this one is quite the opposite—very sacred.” Druuk turned to a section near the back of the book. “Luca, there’s a whole section here about the Umbradors, things I’ve never read.”

“Umbradors?” Luca replied absentmindedly, for his focus was caught by something else, an object just as important as his father’s words.

“Yes, son, I—” Druuk’s eyes suddenly met the top rear corner of the right wall. There he found what caught Luca’s attention.

“Now *that* was something painted by your mother while she kept shelter here,” Druuk said as he moved in closer. The drawing seemed older and more faded than the other parts of the mural. It was a painting of giant humanoid beings made of the brightest light, walking among the trees

and forest.

“Those are them, aren’t they,” Luca said, “the Umbradors?”

“Yes, Son,” Druuk said. “Those are them, or at least, what your mother thought them to be. She always had this unnatural intelligence, like if she knew more in one second than I could infinitely learn in a lifetime. I remember seeing this painting many years ago, but never really understood it. I was still just learning everything about the world. But now, this painting is quite obvious to me. I should have paid more attention to your mother’s drawings, Luca. I should have paid more attention to her every move. I could have saved her.”

Druuk’s disposition turned gray and sullen, and his eyes turned to the ground, defeated. Luca grabbed his father’s hand to comfort him.

“Father, what do you believe about the Umbradors?”

Druuk sighed. “Well, I have found no reason to believe they are just legend, and neither did your mother. No reason at all.”

“But you said you’ve never seen one?”

“Only in the old books, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t felt them here and there, walking along a cool, vast summer meadow or laying underneath a quiet midnight sky. I feel them near, guarding my soul. That feeling is enough for me to believe.”

Luca turned to a strange part of the mural. “What is that?” He pointed towards a section of a group of stars in the night’s sky. Some of the stars were shown as falling down from the sky and smashing onto the earth with great force, and some of the stars were shown bigger than others, brighter, with circles of flames engulfing their cosmic bodies.

When both father and son placed their eyes on the painting, a certain sound came into Luca’s ears, and it traveled into his mind, soft and menacing.

Luca, dear one, come towards the Beast. Run and hide from the sun, for it has come for you. We’ll protect you. Be one of us!

“Did you hear that?” Luca said, paranoid.

“I felt something,” Druuk said, concerned for his son. “What was it?”

“A voice in my head—not coming from me, but penetrating me.”

“A voice? What did it say?”

“It told me to hide from the sun,” Luca said with fear in his eyes. “It said it was after me.”

“No, Luca,” Druuk said, putting his hands on his son’s shoulders. “The sun does not chase

you, but patiently waits for you to stay in its rays. Many people in this world do nothing but runaway from the sun, for the sun reveals people's flaws as shadow, and people loathe to be reminded of their shadows. Dark things will tempt you to turn away from the sun, to marry your shadow, for once you flee the sun, you'll no longer be aware of your insufficiencies. When the sun dies, there will be nothing but darkness, and therefore no shadow, and thus nothing to reveal your flaws. No, Son. Keep as near to the sun as possible. There, and only there, can you not ever become shadow. If the sun ever leaves you, Luca, it will be a perilous journey back to it."

Luca gained a certain confidence from his father's words, so he spoke to him in a sincere manner. "Now that we're in this cave and you've shown me where you met my mother, will you tell me of her death?"

Druuk looked to the ground and pondered. He didn't want to tell him so soon in life about that horrible night and that horrific creature his mother encountered, but he also knew time was running out.

"The Gremleh," he said hesitantly.

"The what?"

"The 'one who is bound to dirt.' The Gremleh, Son. The Perfect Beast. For many years, it's been known to rule the sunless land. It was this beast that ambushed your mother. It was this beast that ripped her apart."

"The beast?" Luca said as he drew his eyes towards the floor with gloom, but then a spark lit up inside him, and his eyes grew angry. "Does this beast still roam the sunless land?"

"I'm afraid so," Druuk said.

"And this sunless land?" Luca said. "Is that not where Lady Malasorta is from?"

"Luca, I fear the lady's origins are more malevolent than they appear."

"Do you think she'll come back to claim me?"

"If she does, we'll be ready," Druuk said with a smile to lift his son's spirits. "Now follow me. There's a reason I brought you here."

Druuk took his son's hand and led him down a small, winding passageway. The passageway led to a small room lit up by a stream of moonlight coming in from the ceiling. Animated by dust particles and a small mist, the moonlit stream shone right on something resembling a lifelike statue covered by a huge blanket.

"This is it, Luca," Druuk said. "Your mother showed me this a few days before her death.

She had been working on it for you to have when you were older.”

“What is it?”

Druuk took a hold of the blanket and pulled it off with one swift movement, and dust blew up all around them. When the dust cleared, they set their eyes on what the moon’s rays revealed: a golden armor, beautiful and shimmering, as if forged from the sun itself. Luca walked closer to inspect it. His mother had constructed a full armor from head to toe from substance akin to gold, yet not entirely the same.

“My mother crafted a suit of armor?” Luca said, amazed.

“Your mother had skills that I couldn’t even begin to comprehend,” Druuk said, studying the armor.

“Well, it’s too big for me to wear...And my leg; it just wouldn’t work.”

“It might not fit you now, but one day, it might come to help you when you truly need it. Regardless, she wanted you to have it. She said one day you’d know why. Your mother, Son, was a very militant woman. Only I knew that of her. She was quick with a blade, swift and efficient, yet still as beautiful as a morning star. She crafted this for you. For what? I don’t know the purpose. I know that you’re a Davinian now, but do with this as you will.”

Luca stared at the golden metal plates in front of him. On the breastplate of the armor was a giant sun with flames reaching out all over the armor, to the limbs, torso, and even the feet. And the helm of the armor was quite interesting; it was shaped in the form of some type of dog or wolf: a bushy canine with thick, golden hairs on its face flaring out to the left and right of the helmet. From the tip of the nose and down, it was empty, cut out for Luca to breathe and speak.

“What is that a likeness of?” Luca said.

“It’s a hound,” Druuk said, pausing. “It was her favorite type of animal. She admired its cunningness, its determination.” And then he lowered his head, as if in thought.

Luca’s eyes beamed with amazement, and he smiled at the thought of his mom making him a golden armor to wear as a warrior. But his joyous disposition quickly changed, and thoughts began to invade his mind, especially one in particular, and his eyes swelled up with tears.

“What good is wearing armor without a sword to wield?” Distressed, Luca ran out of the room and down the passageway, diving into the darkened back room.

“Luca!” his father cried out, running after him.

When he caught up to his son, Luca had already dried away his tears and forgotten about his

woes, for something had peaked his curiosity, something displayed on the wall in front of him. It was part of a larger image, but they could not make out the rest, for the back room was shrouded in darkness.

“What is it, Father?” Luca said.

“It seems to be another painting,” Druuk said as he ran to the front to bring back the torch. Once he came back, Druuk saw that there was a place prepared for someone to make a fire a few feet from the back wall.

“Hmm,” Druuk murmured thoughtfully. There was an abundant source of kindling and tinder near the place to make the fire. “Looks like someone *wants* us to make a fire.”

After gathering all the items, he used the torch to light a substantial fire in the room, and Druuk and Luca stood in front of the fire, gazing at the magnificent painting in front of them.

The painting was expansive, measuring about twelve feet by nine feet, and it was painted in many vibrant colors. They could clearly distinguish all of the variety of objects that made up the painting. With their eyes, they read the drawing’s life; it was an image of a number of children running and gathering around a huge rock, and on the rock was a charming lady with long, flowing hair. In her hands she held a glorious harp, and she strummed the strings to bring out certain temptations that drew the children in. Flowing from the harp were images of musical notes, books, dancing, and people pondering, as if philosophizing.

The children in the painting were covered by cascading elegant robes, and their faces were of pure joy, or rather, happiness, something uniquely temporal but powerful. The children held up their hands, reaching with open arms for everything that came out of the maiden’s harp.

On the top corner of the painting was the sun, shining its rays on the little children. And there was a cliff in the top part of the painting, and on the cliff sat a young child, drooping and sullen, as if truly humbled. His face told of an infinite sadness.

Druuk suddenly sensed a feeling of oddness, a certain façade. His discerning spirit was not going to let this feeling pass, and he knew right there that something was not right. He turned his head to his rear, eyeing the flaming fire with his discerning eyes, and then he turned his sight on the top of the wall behind the fire and saw a small hole that led outside. He could tell, or sense, that it was made for the moonlight to come in, so he made a quick decision.

“Son, help me put out the fire,” he said, rushing to the front to gather some blankets.

“But why?” Luca said. “We won’t be able to see the painting.”

“Heed my words,” Druuk said as he came in and handed Luca a couple of small blankets. “Do it, Luca.”

And so Luca and his father did their best to put out the fire, and in no time, the flames that were once there were no more, and darkness reigned.

“Now what?” Luca said.

“We wait,” Druuk said. As soon as the prince said those words, a stream of moonlight came in from the outside by way of the hole, faintly at first, then stronger by the second, until it became a full-fledged shining beam of light, and with that, the room blew up with life, and the painting shined once more.

“How can that be?” Luca said as he placed his eyes on the new images in front of him.

“I knew it,” Druuk said. “We weren’t looking at the image as it truly was, but only a shell of it. This is the true image, son. This is the truth of what we see.”

Now the image was clear as day, and it was full of many shades of shadow, for the image now was a dark work of art. And the image itself was horrendous: the children were no longer in flowing robes, but in beastly armor, forged in many shapes and colors, and their faces no longer showcased happiness, but a grinding and wailing of teeth. They looked to be screaming in horror, condemning the one standing on the large rock.

The lady of the rock was no longer charming and beautiful, but a tall beast with a long mane, and instead of a harp, it held a lance and a sword in its arms, calling all the children to come hither, to come to the darkness and leave the sun.

Circling the children were adult humans made of shadow, and black spirit-like mists hovered above them. Where the sun once stood in the painting was now a bulging, angry moon, and a fog encompassed the whole of the painting. It was truly a sunless land.

“Father?” Luca said with wary eyes.

“Yes, son?”

“The beast atop the rock?” Luca said with a slight stutter. “Is that—”

“Yes, that’s the Gremleh,” Druuk affirmed with gloom in his eyes. “That’s the beast that took your mother.” After a few moments, Druuk sensed that dark things abounded. “We must go and leave this place. We’ve seen enough.”

Druuk gently pushed his son back into the front room, but before the prince himself was ready to step out, something in the corner of his eye caught his attention. The moon’s rays had

finally revealed the last part of the image, the cliff with the sullen boy. The young child, who was at first seated lowly with a look of shame, was now standing upright, exalted, and the child wore a golden armor in the likeness of a hound, and he barked at the moon for its rebellion against the sun, and the child was truly powerful.

“Son?” Druuk said, calling out to Luca. “Son, wait.” But something suddenly came over Druuk—his illness had taken a turn for the worse. “Luca?” Druuk said, feeling weary and exhausted. “Luca, you—”

“What was that, Father?” Luca said, already at the entrance to the cave.

“Luca, you must—,” and as he said those last words, Druuk plunged to the floor with blood spewing from his nose.

“Father!” cried out Luca, diving to catch his father. “What’s wrong? Father, wake up!” But it was fruitless, for the prince had fallen unconscious and was in need of immediate help.

Luca grabbed his father with all his might and dragged him up to the surface of the land, where he continuously tried to raise him up on his horse. He did not know how to do this, and he was beginning to feel defeated, with streams of tears washing down his drooping cheeks. He also felt as if he needed to make haste, for he sensed dark things surrounding them.

He looked towards the horizon, to a black shadow mass in the distance, and it was moving. But he felt at peace for some reason, and he was right to feel this way, for out of the black mass came a form in the shape of a woman. She carried a walking stick with her, and she was clothed in the most colorful of garments. This woman was Elba, an elder healer, belonging to a group of traveling healers known as Rohpadors.

“There is an ailing prince once again,” Elba said as she approached him. “I could feel him deteriorate from miles away, but the fog began to confuse me as to where he was. That fog is a bastard of the land. But it’s not stronger than me.” She turned to Luca. “Young one, my name is Elba. I was the one that helped heal you when you were just a wee one, the night you were born with your crushed leg. Your father took you to us. He’s in good hands. You must trust me.”

“Come on, lad,” Elba said, reaching out her hand. And out of the shadows, a structure came forth, that of a large caravan pulled by a number of horses. The doors opened up, and three Rohpadors came out, making their ways towards them. “Let’s get ourselves over to the palace, Luca,” Elba said, gently.

He knew of Elba from the stories his father told him of his birth, and all Luca felt inside the

woman was peace and goodness, so he trusted her.

“Will my father be all right?” Luca asked.

“On that, I cannot say. That’s up to the Davinian Healer, Torum. But we must get him there quickly if he is to be saved at all.”

All Blades Unsheathed

"I HEARD A BLADE FLY THROUGH THE WIND!" Pabru said angrily. "Did it cut you?"

"My blades never miss," the dark warrior said. "You on the other side tend to yourself. I'll come for you after I'm done with your friends."

This enraged Pabru even more, and he took a few steps into the lake. "Friend!" Pabru said with an urgency he had never shown before. "Let me know if I should engage!"

Occupied with having to steady his breaths and control the treading of water, Vehru managed to give out a faint signal to his friend. He checked his ear and felt that it was cut at the top, and that a piece of cartilage was missing. Fueled by a flowing stream of anger, Vehru continued onward towards his challenger, but before getting into rhythm, he turned back to Vehru. "Keep at the metal, Pabru!"

Unfazed by the commotion, Lereh kept on swimming towards the shore. The man watched as the well-conditioned Davinians came towards him like predators steadily approaching from the distant waters, so he turned around and walked away from the shore to prepare himself for the duel that was to come.

The moonlight, which was at first frolicking about the borders of the encompassing fog, was now breaking into the center of the lake. It specifically took a liking to the evil man, and it wrapped him up in its luster.

The light of the moon revealed the man's menacing form. He was a giant of a human, measuring close to seven feet tall, with a sleek and muscular frame. He wore a black robe, which he took off as he prepared himself for battle, and was covered in full-plated armor from head to

toe. It was not a heavy armor, but light, and it wrapped around his form like metallic bandages. The armor was the color of twilight, and additionally, it appeared that the moon made the armor come alive with an ill-boding gleam.

It seemed that the whole of the armor had certain slots where he housed his numerous curved blades, all nine of them. They blades were positioned on his body similar to that of a typical Davinian: three in the back, two at the chest, two at the hip, and his special two blades on his forearms, of which one he had already thrown across the lake. On his head, he had an armored helmet much like that of the foul child who had crossed words with Druuk, but his helmet was different in one respect: Instead of being shaped in the image of a pig, it was constructed in the form of a dragon's head, with the mouth and the jaw line left uncovered. Streaming out of the top of the helmet was a long, black mane made out of the hair of a hundred horses. It was so long, it cascaded past his shoulders. Across his lips and his jaw was a treacherous scar that had healed horribly.

The dark warrior found a nice boulder to leap onto, and he crouched on top of it in order to bask in the moon's rejuvenating luminance. He seemed to have gained a certain amount of power from the cosmic vagrant; he squirmed under the moon's rays, as if receiving bolts of electric energy, yet he reveled in the pain. But after experiencing much pleasure, his armor began to sparkle like twilight, and torment spread across his mouth, and there was a grinding of teeth, and the man blasphemed the night.

"May you be cursed, you sons and daughters of the sun," the man said, referring to the stars that had unexpectedly grown in number and increased in brightness as to outshine the moon itself. "You are not like the moon! You are weak, and dare not set yourself apart from the light that shines forth across the cosmos. Cursed are you, blind followers! Why must you be like the sun? Be like the moon, which has set herself apart from the light! Cursed are you tonight!"

But the stars continued to grow in numbers until it seemed as if the stars' light began to burn the man, and he had to retreat back into shadow, so he climbed off the rock and took to a better spot.

"Soon, the light will be no more," he said, approaching the shore and speaking out to his enemy, "Come and cross the lake, children, come and join me on this side."

Hearing his vile words, Vehru and Lereh swam with their eyes on the challenger; they kept their pace in a calm rhythm and used their time to meditate on the upcoming battle. Reaching the

shore, the slowly crept out of the water, drenched and cold, and their clothes appeared like a wet cloth draped over one's hand.

On their way towards the challenger, Vehru dropped his drenched garment, revealing his vest and the markings across it. A Davinian's vest was commonly crafted to look and fit in a certain manner, but each Davinian had the freedom to decorate the vest however they pleased. This being the case, it was not uncommon to see vests in different shades and colors, either adorned with the greatest markings, or accented with more modest details. Vehru's vest resembled that of his father's: it was pure black, like night itself, and across the chest were nine silver stars with one grand star in the center.

At the sight of young Vehru's vest, the dark warrior scoffed at him. "You are just as blind as those up in the sky."

"I didn't cross to this side to trade words with you," Vehru said.

The man scoffed at him once again. "Your impatience shows your lack of experience, young Davinian. I do have to say that your vest is strikingly familiar. Who is your master?"

Before Vehru answered, he took a good look at his opponent. He could see that this malevolent person had the familiar disposition of a Davinian, and he sensed that his nine curved blades were once straight and beautiful. Vehru glanced at the man's horse, which stayed hidden in the shadows, and he saw a beast corrupted by falsity. The being did not even appear as a horse but a cross between an overly tall horse and a stout long-horned bull. Yet, the beast did not have the horns of a bull, but it did have something similar to it. It had the horn of a unicorn, but unlike the majestic horse, its horn was horrifically bent upward—a most gruesome sight.

"We serve only the people of the land," interjected Lereh, taking a few cautious steps.

"The people of the land?" the man said. "How laughable! Do they still teach that silly incompetence at that outdated school? Well, regardless, we fight, but I see that you don't have your Rasplendurs."

"I *have* my Rasplendur but have yet to be ordained," Vehru said.

"Oh, I see, so you're a novotal, a newly-birther, and you're without your Rasplendur. What a shame that is. I was hoping to cross a true master's blade with you. How disappointing. So, then, what blade would you like to begin with? Seeing that I am your challenger, it would be right that you get first choice."

Vehru did not say a word but only reached for his Prossesur on his back.

“Ah, the mighty Prossesur,” said the man, “but where is his sibling?”

“Here is its kin,” Lereh said sharply. “And I’m no novotal!”

The man glanced at the scars adorning Lereh’s face. “Ah, so you have been seasoned with the ways of the blademaster—you have been in battle. You might be more of a challenge for me, but not much. Well, since both brother-blades are present, I shall use mine as well.”

But, whether out of ignorance or courage, Vehru spoke, “They won’t suffice.”

“You have vigor,” the dark Davinian said. “Though your shortage of wisdom is unnerving. Still, I must admit that what you lack warrants the potentiality for learning what you need. Part of me, the old me, still has a need to actualize people’s potentials, especially young students. Do you not think that despicable?”

“Who *are* you?” Lereh said with confidence, but this clearly appeared to have crossed whatever boundaries they had between them, and a low, menacing growl was heard coming from the depths of the dark warrior.

“Don’t bother me with your questions,” he said. “Questions are for me to ask, not you. Nevertheless, it’s time to face your fate, Davinians. We will go to all blades unsheathed.”

“To all blades unsheathed,” they said, taking their stances.

And as if another creature came into the man, his eyes became fierce and grew red in color. His muscles twitched under his armor, giving him the appearance of being twice as muscular as he was before. Instantly, he was full of rage, and he grabbed for the twin blades on his back and unsheathed them. He opened his mouth and gave out what seem to be a hybrid of a hiss and a growl. He squatted down as to be level with the children in front of him, and he swayed back and forth as to keep his rhythm moving, ready to spring into a death blow if given the chance.

“Attack, children!” the Davinian said as he approached them. The man waved his blades in such a manner as to distract his opponents, but Vehru, though young, was much too seasoned for any of that to work. He may have only been a child, but he was Mastro Vohro’s child. Vehru waited in peace and only shuffled his feet as much as he needed to compensate for his opponent’s movement. The boy kept his blade hand up near his face, and with the other hand, guarded his torso.

“This will end quickly,” the man said. “You know this to be true, children.”

Lereh smirked as she realized something. “Dark one,” she said, “I know now you lack one thing.”

“I pray, do tell.”

“It is that which *pride* is not.”

“Fool!” the man said, lunging at Lereh, but the child, being an experienced Davinian, sidestepped to escape her enemy’s lunge and lowered herself close to the ground while simultaneously spinning, which gave her the opportunity to counter with a horizontal cross-slash to the dark one’s shin—to no avail, as her Nunsurrum failed to cut through the man’s armor.

“What?” the dark one said with a smirk. “Did I not reveal to you the nature of my armor? If I didn’t, then I must apologize, scarred one. No Esterran blade, not even that of a Davinian’s, can ever cut through these plates of mine. Like I said before, this duel will only have one outcome, and that is with your death.”

“For that to be true you would have to land a cut on me,” Lereh said.

“Well, if I must,” he said, lunging once more but quickly feigning and unexpectedly attacking Vehru.

Vehru feigned himself, using his Prossesur, lunging straight towards his enemy’s face, and the dark warrior drew back his head, leaving Vehru with the opportunity to use his leg to draw up a great big gust of dirt, which he shot with his foot straight into the man’s face.

With the dark warrior’s focused slightly confused, Vehru grabbed his Eturita blade from his hip and threw it at the man’s head with as much strength as he could muster.

But the man’s skill was too great, and he heard the whistling of the blade’s flight before it even got close to his face, and before the blade was able to make contact with the exposed part of his jaw, the master deflected Vehru’s Eturita with his own Prossesur, and Vehru’s blade flew off into the forest, plunging into the depths of the abyss.

“That took skill, child,” the dark warrior said, “but you aren’t skilled enough. You can’t best me. There is only one outcome to this. Yield to it.”

“I cannot yield but only act,” Vehru said.

With a flow of courage, Vehru went on the attack and lunged at his enemy, only to have the dark master block his slash. But this was part of Vehru’s plan, for his attack gave Lereh the opportunity to lunge at her opponent’s torso, yet once again, the man was able to defend himself. But surprisingly, *this* was also part of Vehru’s tactics, for Vehru then grabbed his *Enebran*, the blade on his left chest, and thrust it towards his enemy’s face.

But as the man said earlier, their skill was not up to par to his, for the dark warrior had

secretly dropped one of his twin blades and grasped his own Enebran to counter Vehru's hidden attack. The Davinian beast slashed a gaping cut on Vehru's forearm, which triggered a horrible yell from the boy. Almost simultaneously, and with the inhuman speed of a devil, the man took his other blade and slashed at Lereh's forearm, making an identical slash, if only for the sake of symmetry. The young Davinians could do nothing but fall to the ground in extreme pain, kneeling before their opponent.

"You know, I expected more from Davinians," the man said as they looked up at him in surprise. "It's a pity that I have to slay someone as young as you two. You do show great potential, enough for me to mold to my wishes. On the other hand, you are still Davinian slaves."

The man reached behind his back and unsheathed his Rasplendur. "Because you have fought with honor and are truly worthy, you will have the pleasure of being slain by my Rasplendur."

He put his powerful blade to Lereh's neck. "Young Servantu, before you die, please know that it is *Mirel* who has bested you tonight and will cut you down with his blade. Know that Mirel used to be a sacred name among the halls of Daví, and soon it will become a horrendous sound wherever it is spoken about by the Order. Do you have any final words to breathe?"

"That which you lack will make you fall," Lereh said.

"Those are confusing words, especially with my blade at your neck."

"Take that filthy blade off her," Vehru snarled, grabbing at his own arm.

"Brave words will not prolong your lives, little ones," said Mirel. "Yield to your fate."

As the young Davinians lay beaten by the dark foe, across the lake, Pabru stood watching his friends' demise. His anger had overcome him, and he had succeeded in mining the metal with great speed before turning his focus on his friends' plight. Seeing Lereh kneeling with a Rasplendur at her neck spoke to him greatly, and he picked up Vehru's Trunu from the ground and readied himself to cross the lake.

But before he could, he was held back by something, and his mouth was covered by someone's hand. Swiftly, Pabru was taken back into the shadows.

"Steady your anger, dear one," Drunen said, holding his hand over the boy's mouth. "Let the things that need to unfold do so."

Pabru recognized his prince's words and calmed himself. Drunen had already warned Luleh as she crouched hidden in the shadows. All three of them stood covered in darkness, waiting for something to happen.

Back on the other side, Mirel had grown tired of crossing words, and he readied his blade to cut down the freckled beauty kneeling before him. "Say the word, Servantu, and I will comply with your death."

But she did not speak, and only the wind rustled, and the three warriors felt a disturbance. A voice came like lightning breaking through the trees, "Dark one, do you think it brave to lay your Rasplendur at a child's neck?"

Immediately, a whistling sound was heard, as if a blade was thrown with great skill towards Mirel's head. The blade was no other than Jeskun's Enebran, and it forced Mirel to block it with his Rasplendur. Mirel's reaction gave Vehru and Lereh the opportunity to roll to their sides and raise themselves to their feet. The young Davinians fled towards Jeskun, who had now appeared out of the darkness like a black shadow taking the form of a warrior.

Startled, Mirel took a few steps back. "Davinian, I don't recognize you."

"It's a pity, since we've certainly met before," Jeskun said. "But now I'm much older and stronger."

"Very well," Mirel conceded. "Regardless, you won't live to see me again. But I pray, do tell, why have you bathed in blood this night?"

Mirel was right to question the young mastro, for after coming out of the depths of the shadows, he could see Jeskun in detail. Blood ran from his head down to his feet, and he was blanketed with mud and loose dirt. His face was a work of bloody art, and only his eyes sparkled against the moon. His hands gripped the twin blades with a force that could rival any predator's talons, and veins bulged about the whole of him. He had been in combat, in which he had turned out the victor, and now he was to approach combat once again, but when he walked towards Mirel it was not with any kind of strut, for he had not the pride to do so, but it was more of being pushed by the wind towards his enemy, with Mastro Jeskun graciously allowing the gust of air to do so.

Following an unexpected moment of reverence, Mirel's disposition turned arrogant. "Ha!" he said. "So you've come to rescue your precious sheep? I will say to you what I said earlier to the Novotal: There is only one outcome to this fight, and it will end with your demise. Now, if you are a true Davinian mastro, you'll take out your Rasplendur."

"I decline your gesture," Jeskun said, raising his Prossesur and Nunsurrum up in the air. "My twins have tasted blood tonight, and that blood is upon their blades. They wouldn't be right in

bringing it upon my Rasplendur.” Mastro Jeskun turned to Vehru and spoke, “Run along now, Vehru, into the shadows, and make sure to cover your ears, for the blades of masters clashing will surely make them bleed.” And he turned to his opponent, “When you’re ready.”

At the other end of the lake, Drunen, Pabru, and Luleh watched in anticipation. “Have you ever seen two masters fight?” the prince said.

“No, sire,” Luleh said.

“It would do you well for you two to watch, and you’ll realize how much knowledge there is still left for you to obtain.”

Everything was quiet; it had to be, for any sound that permeated throughout the timid trees could throw off the slightest mode of attack coming from the two masters. They raised their blades to each other and began to move in a circle. Though Jeskun was a grown man, Mirel stood a few inches taller than him, so the dark warrior still appeared just as impressive as he did next to Vehru and Lereh.

“Tell me, Mastro,” said Mirel “what do you suppose to do with blades that are incapable of cutting through my armor?”

“If that’s the case, I suppose I should beat you to death then,” Jeskun said.

They circled each other for some time and then stopped, for it was time to make their moves. They stood silently in the midst of the moonlit fog. Every muscle fiber twitched throughout their bodies as the two masters quietly ran through their potential movements by squeezing and conditioning their muscles. But they did not move, for to move a muscle was to give away their attack. So the two waited for a sign—a break in the midnight breeze, a fall of a lonely leaf, or the flight of a fleeing night thing...and it came.

It was the hoot of an owl that unleashed the frenzy of blades between the two masters. The two ran towards each other and clashed like two fierce rams knocking horns. And as for what happened next, it could be likened to motion at inhuman speed. Mastro Jeskun was the first to advance, and his arms were thrusting in and out, with his blades jabbing at his opponent, and it seemed as if he was striking in all directions, high and low, torso then legs, then head, and torso again. But the mighty dark one was countering with equal speed, swiftly putting his Rasplendur where it needed to be, up high, then low, then the middle, then to the side and ending up near the top once more. All this happened within a few seconds, all in a matter of a few steps.

As quickly as they stopped, they began again, but this time Mirel advanced and Jeskun fell

back, with the curved one swishing and swirling his Rasplendur like it was made out of the lightest material. And after he confused his opponent with his fancy movements, Mirel began to thrust and slash at all of Jeskun's limbs and vulnerable spots. Typically, it would have been easy for Mirel to land a strike, but things aren't easy between two masters, so just as fast as Mirel struck his thrusts, Jeskun blocked with his twin blades. Mirel's advance ended in a matter of steps, and they stood across from each other once again. Jeskun had not managed to land one blow on the dark one, but again neither had Mirel struck at Jeskun.

Jeskun changed his stance slightly, and Mirel configured his somewhat to make up for the change. Jeskun knew that he needed to finish the duel as quickly as possible if he thought of ever having a chance of winning, and one could tell in the mastro's eyes that things were brewing, things that were only known to him, things learned by him through his personal and disciplined training.

In one short twitch of his feet, Jeskun darted towards Mirel and began his fury once again, but this time, his mind had connected with the difficult teachings he had learned as a mastro, and his arms flung out, moving high and low and to the shoulder then to the ribs and to the thigh, lastly followed by a thrust to the abdomen. Unlike the first advance he made towards Mirel, these advances actually landed in all the right places. His blades struck Mirel's armor like meteors striking hard on the ground. If he was not to cut through the armor, he would at least deal blows to him internally. Mirel did not have enough speed to counter Jeskun's advance, and once he felt the blows, he quickly retracted, falling on one knee. He struggled to breathe.

Jeskun stood across from his opponent. He could tell Mirel had trouble breathing, but after a few seconds, it seemed that Mirel had recovered his breaths. The dark warrior knelt in silence, waiting. Jeskun approached him with his blades held out in a ready stance, prepared to attack if Mirel were to move an inch.

"If you wish to continue, it would be wise to ready yourself," Jeskun said, anticipating an attack.

But even though the mastro was aware and focused on his opponent, it was not enough to match Mirel's next advance. The moment Jeskun finished speaking his words, Mirel snapped upward with a speed that seemed inhuman. His Rasplendur shot towards the mastro's face, and quicker than Jeskun could recognize the slightest movement coming from his opponent, the blade made contact with the left side of the brave mastro's face, making a deep cut across

Jeskun's left eye.

A stream of blood spewed out of his eye, coloring trees and dirt in the immediate area. The mastro, who was strong and alert just seconds before, fell to the ground on his knees, while Mirel raised himself to his feet. In a matter of seconds, the tables had turned, and now Jeskun was at the dark Davinian's mercy, kneeling in front of him, with one hand clutching his left eye and the other still holding his Prossesur.

"Come now, Mastro, you didn't really think you would be the victor of this battle, did you?" Mirel said condescendingly, tapping Jeskun's shoulder with his Rasplendur as a sign of disrespect. "I meant it when I said no blade could ever hurt me, but you didn't want to heed my words."

The reaction he expected from Jeskun was nothing like he received, for Mirel expected Jeskun to ask for an honorable death, but instead Jeskun began to snicker to himself.

"I had my doubts about it working, but things seem to take place just as you need them to sometimes," whispered Jeskun.

"What is that you speak of?" said Mirel.

"Your self-worth has befogged your vision, dark one," Jeskun said. "My goal was not for myself to win, but to bring about a victorious outcome, and contrary to what you believe, I have been successful in what I came here to do. This battle with you has made me aware of something: you possess something I do not."

"Oh, that I knew from the beginning, Mastro. That's why you're on your knees, and I stand above you. But I'm curious. Please, do explain."

"You're focused on your own self and not on the things around you, thus you fail to see what truly lies in the shadow."

"Desperate words coming from a beaten mastro are all I hear."

"No, these words serve the purpose of what I came here to do, and I've been successful in regards to my purpose."

"And what *is* that purpose, Mastro?"

"It's the same purpose that the brave young children took up before me."

"Which is?"

Jeskun stood up, lowered his blade and met the gaze of his enemy with the one eye he had left. "To stall," Jeskun said, raising his blade to his head and retreating back into the shadows.

“You withdraw from me, coward?” said Mirel. “Come back to me!”

Jeskun slipped away into darkness, disappearing from Mirel’s sight. A moment passed, and there was only silence.

“Come back from the shadows!” said Mirel, raising his Rasplendur to the fog in front of him. “Come out and give my Rasplendur the satisfaction it’s due!”

From out of the shadows came a form, but its mass seemed bigger and taller than Jeskun.

“I will give your Rasplendur its due,” Vohro said. “Messing with my son was an unwise move.”

Without a second to spare, Vohro drew out his Rasplendur, a glorious thing of steel, and as it rubbed the borders of its sheath, it made a choral sound that rung out into the air, and the leaves of the forest danced to its song. One could tell there was anguish in Mirel as he bit his lips with disdain. His eyes for once were filled with true fear as the seasoned mastro walked towards him with a disturbing confidence, stopping just a few feet away from Mirel.

“Is that the attitude the mighty Mirel takes up when faced with a master of blades?” Vohro said. “Your father was right in expelling you from the Order, for what you have become is fouler than the fog that surrounds us.”

“What I have become, Mastro Vohro, is more powerful than any Davinian to have ever lived.”

“Raise your Rasplendur and show me,” Vohro said, pointing his blade to Mirel.

The two master Davinians raised their blades to each other, and no words were spoken, for none were needed. Vohro did not circle Mirel, for a mastro of his caliber did not waste time with such pettiness, and after a moment of careful, silent observation, Mirel went in for the attack with a head-on downward slash. Vohro’s eyes grew bigger than the average man, and he saw everything before it all happened; he effortlessly turned to his side with knees bent, and before he countered with his blade, he pondered on his opponent. *What arrogance comes from his first strike? Did I not teach him better than this?*

And Vohro immediately twirled in a manner as to end up behind him. Mirel turned to him.

“Do you wish to battle, or play games?” Vohro said.

“I wish to battle!” cried the dark warrior. On the heels of his words, Vohro lunged at him and crossed Rasplendurs with Mirel, and the two blades clashed with each other for several swings as Vohro forced Mirel to step back. The striking of the blades broke the peace that was found in the

night's sky. The ear-splitting clangs of steel were so dreadful, that Pabru, Luleh, the prince and everyone else present immediately fell to the ground in excruciating pain.

Eventually, the sound stopped, and all was calm as the two warriors drew back their blades and took their stances. As he kept his eyes on Mirel, Vohro could not help but glance at his son, who sat quietly amongst the shadows trying desperately to contain his pain due to the horrible wounds he had received from the dark warrior. *I feel anger slowly creeping up my senses, slowly warming me up and displacing my thoughts. I must end this while I still have a clear mind.*

And just as Vohro finished his last thought, Mirel lunged at him with the same inhuman speed he had bested Jeskun with, and his first attack came from below, but Vohro, who had the eyes of an eagle, could see every attack that came towards him regardless of speed, and with a flick of a wrist, he blocked Mirel's Rasplendur, which in turn catapulted Vohro's own Rasplendur upward, and the deaf mastro used this extra push to counterstrike with an upward slash directed at Mirel's exposed jaw.

The blade made contact with his flesh, and it was heard before it was seen. Vohro's blade reopened the scar that had adorned Mirel's face for many years, and blood spewed out into the open air in such a manner that it seemed as if it bathed the moon in red. Mirel grabbed his mouth with both hands and fell to the floor.

Vohro approached Mirel with his Rasplendur pointed at his head, tapping him on the shoulder just as he had done to Jeskun, but before Mirel could react, Vohro witnessed an image stepping into the peripheral view of his left eye: a long, fierce lance made of ivory and steel landed right between the two masters, and it forced Vohro to step back and take a ready stance.

Vohro heard a vile laugh echo throughout the space surrounding the lake, and the fog that encircled him began to move in a whirlpool motion; it seeped in and broke into the boundaries of the lake.

In the midst of the fog, they heard the sounds of a hundred hoofs and the sickening chirp of the beastly child's laughter. This all happened within a few seconds, and when all was done, the fog receded back into the surrounding area, clearing up the space around the lake.

Vohro stood in the aftermath of his victory. It was obvious that the dark Davinian had disappeared. He had been taken by the foul child—rescued, it seemed. For the time being, the danger had dissipated, and Vohro stepped out from the shadows and into the clearing, in full vision of his students, prince, and fellow warrior.

And like any seasoned and glorious teacher of blades would exclaim, he raised his Rasplendur to the air, swirled it and then swiftly sheathed it on his back. He spoke the words which he knew by heart, words which he had expressed a multitude of times.

“Children, tonight’s lesson is over.”

And all who were with him breathed a sigh of relief.

Sword from the Sky

AN AMBER DAWN CREPT INTO THE EMBRACING ARMS OF the horizon, but unlike other days, the sun had awoken exhausted, weak from the dizziness of the lurking fog. A slight overcast towered over the land, yet there was no rain but only a small drizzle from the reigning mist begotten by the bastard fog. In the air was the smell of damp moss, and the scent of a passing thunderstorm played against the wind. The birds lay hidden in the womb of the trees, and the typical morning critters were not seen wandering about performing their daily meanderings but rather stood at the edges of the forest waiting to see what the day was to bring forth.

The greenness of the trees had been eaten up by the ambiguity of the fog, and the vibrant hill-land pastures leading up to the palace gates were characterized by a sense of mourning, as if the many acres of grass and dirt were weeping the death of beauty. The palace itself had lost all its majesty; the fog had caused grime to build up and molest the vibrancy it once had.

A few yards from the palace gates, a large, shapeless mass sprinted across the landscape. Elba and Luca carried the prince between them as they neared the palace gates.

“Quickly, we must get the prince to Torum,” Elba said.

But as they neared the entrance, Luca spotted a man running up their way.

“A Massangah,” Luca said, slowing down.

Massangahs were the official messengers of the Order, dressed in the brightest garments of red and gold. The Massangah slowed his pace as he approached the fallen Jubahn.

“Prince Luca, I bring a message from the Servantu Alta. You are to report immediately to the main hall for the *pronouncement of exile*.” After delivering the message, the man disappeared

among the shadows of the dawn's embrace.

Luca turned to Elba, and she sensed his worries. "Are you okay, young master?"

"I... I don't know what's going to happen to me," Luca said. "I just wish things weren't moving so fast."

"I don't think the pronouncement of exile will mean that you'll be exiled immediately," Elba tried to set his mind at ease, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Go now, my little prince. I'll take care of your father. Come back when you have finished your business."

"Thanks, Elba," Luca said as he turned and made his way to the school.

Upon reaching the main hall of the massive Davinian structure, Luca walked softly past the doors into the room, and as soon as he stepped into the vacant space, he saw Siel sitting on the Alta's throne with mastros Vohro, Jeskun and Gehwen seated to his right in *their* respective thrones.

To the left of the Servantu Alta were the seven Davinian Mejurs, or grand specialists of the blades, seated in their exalted seats. Behind Siel were twelve Servantus, in fact the top twelve of the Order, otherwise known as the "Servantu Premera." All together they made up the Davinian Court of Officials.

"Come to us, fallen Jubahn," Siel said.

As Luca approached, he noticed the hall was dark and unwelcoming due to the weakness of the day's sun. Once he reached them, he knelt in front of the officials.

"I'm here for my exile, Alta," Luca said, humbly.

"Let us make this brief, Luca," Siel said. "For I know that much troubles you, and there are things afoot that demand our attention. I'll now ask the four Voses to join us."

On Siel's command, four mysterious Davinians entered the hall. These chanters were dressed in dark robes from head to toe. With them they brought some clothes, a vest, and some sort of mask. Reaching Luca, the voses encircled him.

"Yes, Prince Lucanah bal Bune, because you were pronounced a fallen Jubahn, you're responsible to carry out the corresponding penance, and thus you're hereby exiled from the Order and from the land of Bune for forty weeks."

"Forty weeks?" Luca said. "That's a long time, Alta. What am I to do for such a stretch of time? Is there a mission?"

“No, there is no mission. During your time as an exile, it is imperative that you learn to master your focus. This doesn’t mean that you have a long road ahead of you. I would say it is small, but it is a road nevertheless, and you must travel it. If you keep yourself in the right direction, the road will lead you back here at the end of your travels. You may ask, how do I go about discovering the right path? There is no single answer to that, but if I were you, I would start with the people of the land. Give yourself to them, learn from them, and they’ll give you all they have to offer.”

“You want me to offer my services to them?” Luca said.

“I want you to offer up *yourself*. You have to give yourself completely. Then, can the people put you on the right path.”

“Anything you ask of me, Alta, I’ll do,” Luca said without hesitation.

“Luca, I know that you can sense *spirit* like your father, not yet as proficiently, but you have inside the potential to discern greater spiritual things than anyone in the land. I know you’ve felt a strange presence lurking throughout Bune. Luca, if dangerous and dark things go afoot here at the school and at the palace in the next few days, you mustn’t break the punishment of exile. You must leave regardless of what happens here. This is very important.”

“These dark *things* you talk about,” Luca said. “Are they the same things that speak to me and torment me? Do they have anything to do with Lady Malasorta?”

Siel’s posture stiffened, and his face hardened. “Luca, since you took your first breath, you have been the target of something unimaginable. The reason is still unknown to me, but these things are after you. You must endure and keep focus on the good things in your life.”

Siel gestured for the Voses to commence with what they came there to do. They lined up in front of Luca with their arms raised to demonstrate what they carried, and they began to chant the Song of Exile, which was a tune that was nothing less than solemn.

One after the other, they were to give the boy what they had brought with them. The first vose approached Luca, still singing the song of exile, and handed him a long, dirt-ridden hooded cloak, dark brown in color, and it was old and worn. The robe signified the crudeness of the land. He then handed him a pair of soft, worn pants and a shirt of the same dark color.

“This is your new cloak, Luca,” Siel said. “You must discard your jubahn’s ren once you put this on. And these are your new clothes. These you will wear under your cloak and vest.”

The second vose approached Luca, giving him a vest. It was well-worn from what looked to

be extensive use. The vest had several cuts and scratches all over it, and it was of a dark brown, earthy color, and instead of having the royal crest in the middle, as his present one did, it had a hand-drawn picture of a broken blade, a Rasplendur, to be exact.

“This is your new vest,” Siel said. “Wear it during your term as an exile.”

Luca accepted the vest. And the third vose came upon him, singing along with the others. He handed Luca six Davinian blades, but these were not like his own blades; these blades were made of wood.

“Luca, these blades will replace your real ones during your time as an exile,” Siel said. This hurt Luca the most. “You won’t be allowed to wield your blades until you come back to us. This doesn’t mean that you’re barred from defending yourself if a situation were to arise. You just cannot wield your blades. So, because of this, these wooden blades will serve as a reminder of your exile, and they are to replace the true blades you wear on your vest, starting now.”

Alas, the fourth vose made his way up to Luca, handing him a strange mask. It was thin and flexible yet durable and was made to fit his face perfectly. The mask had holes cut out for the eyes, nostrils, and mouth. It was crafted of a smooth wood and covered with a soft leather surface painted all in white. Across the cheeks and nose of the mask was a painting of a starry, midnight sky the color of twilight. And encompassing the hole that corresponded to the right eye was a painting of a shooting star, silver and magnificent.

“Lastly, Luca, you must wear this mask during your exile whenever you’re within the people of the land. They must not know your true self, that you are a prince, but they *will* know that you were born under a Moon Ire.”

The last vose retreated from Luca, and the fallen jubahn held all that he had to wear.

“Luca, you’re to put all of these things on before you leave this school,” Siel said. “And as a show of confidence, we have given you three days to prepare, but after that, you mustn’t be seen. I know that your father is ill. Spend the time given to you with him. He will want to be with you in his time of need.”

“Thank you, Alta,” Luca said. “I won’t disappoint you.”

“That is all, Luca,” Siel said. “Remember, do what you think is right to earn your Rasplendur.”

After he had bowed his head to the officials, Luca took a few steps backward, turned and headed out of the hall. He entered the school’s main passageway, and after the doors closed

behind him, he quickly changed into his exile clothes. As he changed into his new clothes, despair entered him, and he suddenly felt the urge to break loose and run with all his might. Once done, he took off running down the school, breaking out into the courtyard and sprinting with all his might down that length of the bridge known to all Davinians as “One’s Path.”

Sweat poured down the lengths of his cheeks as he ran faster than he had ever run before, but he soon found himself stopping, for he felt the need to walk and contemplate the things around him. Luca had traveled half the length of the bridge when he came upon this sense of peace.

The sun reflected off the gorge’s expansive cliffs, and he could feel a breeze leap up from the bottom of the river to the top of the bridge, gently lifting his clothes up and invading the dead air space caught between his skin and the surface of his cold mask. He experienced relief, and felt the need to keep himself free of emotion, at least for the time spent crossing the latter half of the bridge.

The boy looked out of place. He was a dirty old thing, sporting many levels of stains on his garments. The wooden blades he wore were dull in comparison to the marbled floor of the great bridge, and it seemed from far away as if Luca was a speck of dirt cleaving onto something beautiful and immaculate. As he crossed the One’s Path, not one bird sung nature’s hymn. One could not even hear the running of the river’s hum, but only a desperate sound, that of a solitary wooden leg smacking the bridge’s unblemished floors. How could sorrow be surrounded by so much beauty, he thought. Yet, unexpectedly, he smiled.

As he reached the end of the bridge, he noticed a Davinian stable in the distance, so he sprinted towards the horsemaster in order to acquire a horse. As soon as he saw Luca, the horsemaster took a few steps back. Luca was still under the impression that everyone in the land would recognize him as a prince of Bune, but this was not so, since he was in the disguise of an exile.

Luca came to a hard stop, and his feet dug into the dirt, forcing a dusty cloud to come between him and the horsemaster.

“Who are you?” the scared man said.

“Don’t you recognize me?” Luca said, becoming cautious.

The horsemaster just stepped away from him some more. “Are you a thief?” he said. “Take whatever you want, but don’t hurt me please.”

“No, I’m prin—” and Luca realized that he was no longer a prince to the people of the land.

“I just want one of your horses. I’ll have someone bring it back. I promise.” He walked up to a horse and grabbed it by the reins. He mounted it, taking off towards the forest in the distance.

Luca rode his horse on his way to Loshendu Forest. Now that he had broken away from the glorious bridge, his feelings of anger, pride and doubt returned, and in his fragile state, he had not the strength to subdue them. So he rode on, breaking through the wind, with a pain that amplified the faster the horse pounced on the barren terrain.

The fog had infected most of the forest, yet the anemic sun had been able to break through some of the fog’s density. No matter. Luca did not have a care in the world, and he rode on for a few miles, oblivious to the fog’s many dangers. Finally breaking into the forest’s borders, the horse became startled by the dense smoke, and it froze its thunderous gallop. Instantly, Luca was thrown into the air.

Luca flew through the gray mist, crashing hard on the soft, damp soil of the land. The boy lay on his back, feeling the excruciating pain running up and down his limbs. He kept himself still in the grass for a while in order to regain his peace of mind.

Coming back to his senses, Luca put his hands to his face to make sure the mask was still intact, and he rose up to his feet. He felt the pain of the fall move throughout his muscles, and it only made the indwelling pity feel even worse.

It took a few minutes for Luca to shake off most of the pain, and he started to jog into the heart of the forest, for he thought maybe his sense of self-pity would die away with some physical exercise. Once he realized that simple jogging did not appease him, he quickened his pace into a run, and as he ran through the forest, with the wild things of the trees watching his every move, he didn’t hesitate to dodge any of the overreaching branches protruding from the various trees. He ran through them, busting their fragile bodies like a hurricane wind wreaking havoc on the forest.

It was only a matter of time before Luca’s self-indulgent plunge into the forest would fail to satisfy his need for comfort, and he knew that eventually he would run out of steam. He managed to come upon a small clearing in the forest where he could break down in exhaustion and fall to his knees. He bowed his head and clutched his mask. He cried uncontrollably; moments passed as he sobbed in his tears.

When he finally calmed himself down, he looked up to the sky and saw nothing but mostly fog above him. He looked across from him and saw a tree just a few feet away. It was broken and

seemed to be rotting from the inside. It did not look like the trees to the right and left of it. In fact, it looked quite miserable next to them, but the poor tree stood upright, raising its weak arms to the sky with whatever leaves it had left to add to the abundance of green- giving life to the forest.

Staring at the miserable tree, anger spread across Luca's body, and he was so enraged that he cursed himself, and with one hasty movement, he took off his mask and launched it towards the sullen tree. The mask shot through the air and hit the tree with incredible force, but it did not break. Rather, the mask bounced off the tree, hit the ground and gently rolled its way back to Luca. It slowed down just as it reached him, ending up leaning against his left knee. Stunned at first, Luca suddenly began to laugh, as if he were the butt of some grand cosmic joke.

"It seems I can't get rid of you," Luca said. He raised his head to the tree in front of him, the despairing, dying tree.

"So I guess I'm not alone as long as I have you, little tree. You seem to never give up, with your melancholic arms stretched up to the sky." Luca grabbed and stared at his mask. "If it is what needs to be done, then it shall be done." He put his mask back on.

Luca stood up and walked over to the tree. He sat and leaned against it in order to take in the moment with his newfound friend. And as he sat there with his thoughts on his woes, he noticed that the fog above him began to move away, and it seemed as if a circle of light opened up above him, revealing the noble sun. The leaves were now prettier than ever, and he smiled at the beauty that had disclosed itself to him. He rejoiced, for he basked in the sun's rays even if it would only last but a few seconds. He closed his eyes.

As the fallen jubahn navigated the vast halls of his mind, something began to happen above him. Up in the sky, past the clouds, the blueness of the air reigned, and there was a noise about the space of blueness. A cry of thunder and song was heard, as if the sky had split, revealing two worlds: one of noise and one of melodious grace. None could hear this tempest of harmony, for it was far above the clouds. As seconds went by, the canticles ceased, and there was only silence—a dead silence, free of things, space, and time. And it was as if the clouds stood still, when out of the open air, a sword came downward from the sky.

It did not seem to have been thrown down but dropped with intent. And it dropped and dropped, downward it went, until it no longer could drop anymore. A number of yards away from Luca, the sword slammed into the ground, and a great, big gust of wind shot forth from the blade,

shaking the trees and leaves and all the critters about the place. Luca's cloak flapped with the wind, and he was abruptly awakened from his rest.

Refreshed with what seemed like a new life, Luca stood up and turned his head in every direction he could, and all he saw was the movement of trees and the scattering of the forest animals. But it all became silent, as if he'd just stepped into dead space; he could not even hear his own inner voice echoing as a ringing in his ears. Gradually, sound came back to him. First he heard the wind, as if it were conversing with him, and he felt it run through his body, as if showing him how to move his limbs in this new life of his, yet, soon after, it stopped.

He was transfigured into something marvelous. He heard the beauty of the color in the living trees. He saw the music of the leaves surfing the tides of the wind. And he smelled what could not be smelled and felt what could not be touched. He now knew the greenness of the forest without having to use his eyes. But again, after a wonderful moment, this stopped as well.

A staggering light shot out the cluster of trees to the west of him, and he couldn't see for a while, until shortly after, the light grew dim enough to where he could open his eyes and focus on the direction it was coming from. He saw critters on the ground rushing past his side, so he decided to follow them and see where they would lead him to.

He approached the light with more reluctance than the animals, with his hand still raised to cover some of the brilliance that burned his eyes. He progressed through brush and branches, and he followed the critters, for they all knew where to go. Ultimately, he came upon another clearing, one that wasn't there prior to the sword falling from the sky. He took both his hands and pulled away what seemed to be the final two branches that stood in his way.

He put his first foot into the clearing and waited. He brought his second foot down and waited some more. He looked up to the sky, and it was clear; no more fog for the time being. He brought his hand up to his eyes to diffuse some of the light, and instantly it seemed as if his eyes grew more powerful than ever, powerful enough to behold what had crashed down onto the land. A sword, a gallant thing of beauty, was stuck in the ground right in front of his eyes.

The sword *was* and *was not* like a Rasplendur. It was shaped like one, with a long, two-handed grip, a modest guard, and an illustriously long, two-sided blade of medium width, but also it was much longer than a Rasplendur yet thinner from pommel to point. The hilt gleamed of marble and gold, with a handguard full of gold and sapphires. And the blade was heroic, with the most incredible metal, gleaming like pure silver, and it was of a duo-tone color, for the middle

part of the blade, the fuller, was made of the purest gold.

Near the point of the blade on one side, there was a word, like a name, but it was written in old Esterran, which was something Luca could not translate. As he moved closer to the sword, thoughts raced through his mind. He looked to the east and west, to the ground and to the sky. Where did this sword come from? Did it come from the sky? If it did, how? Did somebody put it here on purpose? But there was no one around. Even more important was the question: could he take the sword?

Luca approached the skyward blade. Reaching for it, he grasped the hilt, and the wind sung around him, and the critters rejoiced. Luca took the sword out of the ground and handled it with both hands while he adored it with his curious eyes.

To test its vitality, he walked up to a large stone about twice his size, and with a light movement, he swung the sword upwards then down on the stone to see how much of a cut it would make. The sword did not cut the stone, but rather, split it in two, like it was a piece of soft fruit, and it felt as if he had just dipped his sword in water; it was effortless. Stunned, Luca took a few steps back, and his respect for the sword grew immensely, and he no longer handled it like a master but now like a student. Luca dropped the blade.

The strangest thing happened after he dropped the sword: seconds after he finished cutting the stone, the sword began to lose its luster, and it grew dull in appearance. It started to stain, as if it was all of a sudden beginning to rust. And dirt began to accumulate all over it, so much so, that none of its beauty was readily apparent, but the markings and name were still visible. It had turned into an old, dismal sword, at least compared to what it was just seconds before. Being that it was no longer intimidating, he bent over and picked it up. He knew whether dull or beautiful, he had to take the sword with him, and immediately after he thought this, a familiar feeling flowed throughout his limbs, and he was overwhelmed with the urge to discern his surroundings.

So he did, and he felt things around him, things of beauty yet also things of death. It was time for him to be on the move. He looked up to the sky, and the fog once more began to overtake his surroundings, and it grew darker amongst his space. It was now close to dusk; it had seemed that his time with the sword had taken up a number of hours, though to him, the encounter felt like minutes.

Without thought, he grabbed a blanket from his bag and wrapped it around the sword. Next, he took some rope and tied it around the blanket to keep the sword secured. Under the cover of

the fog, he took off into the forest, running as fast as he could towards the border, until he reached his horse, which had not moved an inch, as if knowing he was to wait for Luca's return.

Mounting his horse, the boy knew that certain things had been set in motion, unnatural things that he would play a large part in. But what, he thought?

With a renewed faith in himself and a new sense of purpose, Luca sat idly, studying the darkness looming in the distance. "I sense something, horse," Luca said, "something I've never felt before. The land is dying, and I'm afraid there's nothing we can do to stop it."

Unsure of what was to come, Luca made his way back to the palace.

A Father's Secret

WHEN LUCA REACHED THE LEVEL OF THE PALACE HARBORING his father's room, he saw Torum step out of Druuk's chambers; his drooping shoulders spoke of a tiresome day, and Luca was scared to approach the Davinian healer, but he did anyway.

"How's my father?" Luca said warily.

"Luca, I didn't realize you were here. Your father has been asking for you all day. You must go in and spend some time with the prince."

"What will happen to him?"

"Well, it's hard to say, but his condition isn't well; there's something with the lungs, something rabid. I was able to stabilize him, which is good, but he needs a lot of time to rest. We were all about to leave the room so he could try to get some sleep. It's vital that he does so, if he wishes to ever recover from this spell. But I think he needs to see you first before he falls asleep, for I'll not be allowing visitors once he does drift off into his dreams. Now hurry in there, my young prince."

"Thanks, Torum. I won't be long."

Luca entered the room. It was dark, with only one lantern lit on top of the corner desk; it revealed about a third of the room, with the rest slumbering in shadows. Vohro was inside the prince's room, solemnly posted near the corner, making sure no one would come to harm his long-time friend. Elba was also there, standing next to the prince's side.

Once Luca entered the room, his father immediately sensed his presence and called out to his son. "Luca," Druuk said. "At last, you have returned. Come here, Son. Come be with your

father.”

Luca approached Druuk’s bedside while Elba took a few steps back and placed herself near the desk. As Luca came nearer and broke away from the shadows, they could see his new clothes. When he noticed that they were all staring at him, he stopped for a second. The shadows only covered his backside while exposing his front. No one could see the package he carried on his back.

“Are you in exile already?” Druuk said.

“Yes, Father.”

“Is that where you’ve been all this time?”

“Yes, at the school. Siel called for me, and so I went. They pronounced my exile, and after that, I went to the forest.”

“You went out into the forest in this fog? You know better, Luca.”

“It was a hasty decision, but the sun was out, and it had cleared some of the fog. I was only there for a brief time.”

Druuk gave him a disapproving scowl and then changed the subject. “So then, *that’s* what you have to wear?” he asked.

“And this mask,” Luca added, raising it up to his father.

“I see,” Druuk said. “And how long must you be like this?”

“Forty weeks.”

“Forty weeks?” Druuk said, trying to sit up but not able to make it, so Elba had to step in and raise him up. He coughed for a number of seconds and then resettled himself. “That’s a long time.”

“I questioned them about it, but Siel assured me it was for my own good.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” Druuk said. “You must complete the exile, Son. The school demands this of you.”

“I know, Father, and I’ve come to accept it.”

“Very good, Son,” Druuk said. “Forty weeks then? Forty weeks away from here, from all this fog? That is a good thing, that you must leave. And you must leave here as soon as possible.”

“Siel gave me three days to prepare.”

“Three days? Only take one day to prepare, and then you’ll leave.”

“But why? I don’t want to leave so soon. My friends—I want to spend time with them. And

you—I don't want to leave you, not like this.”

“Don't worry about me, Luca,” Druuk said between coughs. “Worry about yourself. I'll be fine here. I have my guards, and I have my good friend, Vohro. I'll recover from this, and I'll wait for you to come back to us once your exile is over.” Druuk turned his head towards the window, contemplating the state of things out in the horizon. “I sense that things are not right here. I'm sure you aren't aware of what happened to your friend, Vehru, and of the dark ones that your uncle and the mastros encountered.”

“No, what happened?”

“Your friends were besieged by dark things, but they're okay. It seemed that they sneaked out in search for your new... metal leg?”

“Oh, my,” Luca said, “they didn't.”

“They did, and it was a good thing Vohro found them and dealt with the threat, as always when children do foolish things. This was all too troubling for me. We're unsure of who these dark ones are. I ran into one myself on the way to our manor, a beastly child. Plus, I have no doubt that beast of a woman who calls herself your aunt will be back to do everything in her power to claim you. It'll be wise of you to leave, and do so in secrecy. I must counsel with Siel once you're gone.”

“But where will I go? How should I leave in secrecy without anyone knowing? I don't want to be by myself. I'm scared to leave.”

“I know, Son,” Druuk said gently. “It all seems overwhelming at first, but once you get to it, it will all sort itself out—and you *won't* be going alone. Elba will be coming with you.”

“Elba?” Luca said as he turned to her.

“Yes, Elba,” Druuk said. “I've asked her to accompany you in your journey. Elba was the one that cared for you when you were newly born, and now she cares for you still. She has agreed to do this, and I'm forever in her debt.”

“Where am I to go?”

“That will be up to you, Luca. I can't tell you more than that. You'll know what to do when the time comes,” Druuk said confidently.

Distressed, Luca took a couple of steps forward into the light, and all of the shadows that were on him disappeared.

“What is that you carry on your back, Son?”

Luca hesitated, for though he wanted to tell his father, he didn't have the right words to do so. Vohro took himself out of the shadows and came closer to Luca and Druuk.

"It's a secret," Luca said, taking the package off his back and raising it up to his father, "but I wanted to show it to you, because it was strange that I came upon it."

"Well, what is it?" Druuk said.

"It's a sword, a long blade."

"Oh, you found a sword?" Druuk said, stopping himself to cough once again. "If it's just a sword, then why do you keep it secret?"

"Because it came from the sky."

Vohro's eyes bloomed. Elba smiled.

"From the sky?" Druuk said. "What exactly do you mean?"

"It seems to have fallen from the sky. It just came out of nowhere. I didn't see it fall, but I know it to be from the sky. I'm sure of it. That's really all I can say about it. It came down from above with a thunderous wind, and when it hit the ground all the trees shook, and the wild things were in fear yet amazed. It landed just a few yards from me. There was a bright light that shone from it. All the critters of the forest ran up to it, so I followed them. And that's when I found the sword. Once I got to the clearing where it was, I was blinded by the light for a moment, but my eyes suddenly took to the light, and there it was—the most beautiful sword my eyes had ever witnessed. The guard and hilt are made of the most immaculate marble with sapphires throughout. And it has a blade of silver and gold."

"Of silver and gold?" Vohro said.

"Yes, at least to my eyes, that is what it seems," Luca said.

"Then let us look upon it," Druuk said.

"Well, it's not as glorious now as it was when I first saw it," Luca said. "After marveling at it, I grabbed a hold of it, and to test its bite I struck it upon a stone, and the stone split in two; it was like dipping the sword into the calmest of streams. But I got scared of its power and dropped it on the ground. Soon after that, it began to cover itself with dirt and hard mud, though I don't know where it all came from—it just happened. So it's no longer as radiant as it once was, but it's still worth a look at."

Luca revealed the blade from underneath the blanket, and even though the sword was riddled with dirt and mud, it came out like a thing of brilliance. A small breath of a breeze caressed their

faces, and Elba, Vohro and Druuk were all taken aback, as the sword seemed to have let out a power the second it was revealed to them.

Druuk gazed at the sword in front of him, and he realized it was something not of this world. “You mustn’t tell anyone about this sword,” Druuk said, reaching out his hand. “Give it here, Son.”

Luca gave the sword to his father. Druuk inspected it thoroughly.

“Vohro, have you ever seen anything like it?” Vohro indicated that he hadn’t. “Why did it cover itself with so much dirt? That *is* strange. And this gold and silver-like metal; it’s nothing like I’ve seen before.” Druuk held the blade closer to his face and saw the markings on the metal itself. “These seem to be pictures of a story of some sort, but I can’t make them out.” He took hold of the blade’s tip. “There’s a word here, like a name, in old Esterran.”

“What does it say?” Luca said.

“There’s an *R*, and an *A*,” Druuk said, and he stopped, as if remembering something. “It reads ‘*Rahsendu*.’” Druuk’s eyes, along with Elba’s, grew bigger with the sound of that name. “This is Rahsendu?”

“Glorious,” Elba said.

“What is Rahsendu?” Luca said.

“Rahsendu is the sword’s name,” Druuk said. “It is of myth. Luca, this sword came to you for a reason. Don’t discard it. Before you leave for your exile, we’ll go to Siel with it. He’ll know what to do with the sword. And hopefully, at the school it shall remain until we can uncover everything about it. Keep it under guise until tomorrow morning.”

With each word that he spoke, Druuk became increasingly tired, and he ended his last sentence with a slew of hardened coughs.

“The prince needs his rest, Luca,” Elba said gently. “We should come back tomorrow.”

Druuk paid no heed to the elder Rohpa and kept inspecting the sword. He found a peculiar inscription engraved in a small patch of dirt that had crusted over the lower part of the blade. “This is interesting. There’s another inscription.”

“I don’t recall that one, Father,” Luca said as he took a look at it.

“This language appears well formed, too pretty to be exact. The writing is foreign to me, and I can’t read it, but I sense something. I sense the inscription to be foul, probably made after you wrapped it in your cloak. This is a powerful sword, and I would bet that it’ll attract the most

unclean of beings, seen and unseen. Don't learn this language on the inscription, Luca. It may appear attractive, but don't speak it. Do you understand, Luca? Once the dirt is removed, so too will the cursed writing. We've spoken too long on this. We'll speak more with Siel."

Druuk turned to Elba. "Make sure you watch over him as he goes back to his room tonight," he said.

"I will my prince," Elba replied.

"Well, so now I am your *prince*?" Druuk said with a smile. Elba smirked. Druuk began to cough once more. "Get me some water, Son."

Luca walked over to the corner desk and used a big jug to pour some water into a small cup. He took it and brought it to his father. "Here, drink," Luca said as he held it to Druuk's mouth.

Druuk took a refreshing gulp and let out a big sigh. "Much better." And after a pause, he said, "Come now, Son, we must talk of other things."

"Like what?" Luca said.

"I feel that there's a great weight on your shoulders," Druuk said. "You don't walk as high and erect as I know you to. Do you feel as if all of the world's sorrow has suddenly been placed upon your shoulders?"

Luca didn't say anything right away but just looked down to the floor. "Sometimes I do. Sometimes I can't help but feel humiliated. I would trade all of my belongings to not ever feel like this again."

"I know it's hard," Druuk said, placing his hand on Luca's shoulders. "But believe me when I say that whenever you feel as you do now, it's because happiness has been brought upon you, not sorrow."

"I don't understand."

"Those who have been brought low will rise taller than those who have never knelt in sorrow. That's the true way of the Davinian master. He who gives the most will become the most. Remember that there will always be a settling of accounts, and you have given much, thus much is owed to you, whether you expect it or not. Always be sure to remember this when you go on your exile and you're overcome with shame. Don't place your thoughts on earning your Rasplendur, because that is not your weapon."

Druuk took his finger and pointed to his son's wooden leg. "*This* is your true weapon. It's the most powerful weapon against all the darkness that's coming, because it's there where you find

the most humility. It takes a certain person to think nothing of himself, that he would be greatly humbled and yet feel no sorrow but joy. That is the joy that wins wars and defeats the greatest of armies. That wooden leg of yours is the greatest weapon you could ever wield.”

Luca stared at his father and put some thought to his words.

“Luca, I forgot to teach you something at the cave. I meant to do this, but we ran out of time. Remember when you asked me about the Umbradors some time ago, and I explained my belief that each one of us has a star appointed to us as a guardian of our soul? That they watch over us in times of need and in times of leisure?”

“Yes, I remember,” Luca said with an insightful look about him.

“Well, you can never neglect that relationship,” Druuk said, coughing some more. “They’re not at your beck and call, or rather, the relationship you have with your Umbrador is sacred and requires a deep respect. You should never take advantage of it. They’re not like pets, rather, you are like theirs, and what do pets do? They call on their master’s attention, because the master is always inclined to separate themselves from their pets if they tend to feel neglected. Ask for their love and companionship, and they shall give it to you, just as they want us to do in return, but we who are made of dirt sometimes keep our reception of their love buried under much rubble. Learn to take away that debris so you can receive the love that is waiting for you. When you are in need, ask for it.”

“But how do I ask for it?” Luca said.

“That’s simple,” Druuk said, clearing his throat. “You just speak the words. For instance, you can say, ‘O Umbrador, attendant of my light, shine on me this night, forsake me not if I have neglected you, but do not depart from me, and do not let any evil subdue me, but take thee by my hand and guide me to your shelter.’” Druuk took Luca’s hand and caressed his son’s cheek. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, I’ll remember.”

“Good,” Druuk said through his coughs, but this time it was so overwhelming that he had to lie back down on the bed.

“Okay, that’s quite enough, now,” Elba insisted. “We must leave the prince to his rest, young one.”

“I’ll stay with him until he falls asleep,” Vohro said.

“Yes, I need rest,” Druuk said.

Luca bent over to his dad and kissed him on his forehead. "I love you, Father."

Druuk just smiled at his son. "And I you."

Luca turned and started to walk away when Druuk began to entertain a thought. Things inside his mind scattered around at lightning speed, and his eyes grew big, as if a locomotive of thoughts had run away and derailed inside his mind. There was something he wanted to tell Luca, something he had been holding onto for the longest time, but he wasn't sure if he should. But when should he, if not now?

"Luca," Druuk said, trying desperately to raise his head. "Come, there's one more thing I need to tell you."

Luca turned to him and quickly stepped up to his bedside. "What's the matter?"

"I—" Druuk thought about it some more. "I want to speak to you about the *beast*."

"The beast?" Luca said with curiosity, yet also some fear. Vohro's eyes tensed up.

"Yes, the beast."

"You mean Lady Malasorta?" Luca said.

"No," Druuk said. "The beast whose image we saw in the cave, the one known as the *Gremleh*."

"The Gremleh? The ruler of the Sunless Land?"

"Yes, that's the one, the one who took your mother away from us."

"What is it that you need to tell me about the Gremleh?"

Druuk pleaded for more water. After Luca gave him a drink, he continued, "You must find this beast, Luca. You must go and seek it out."

Vohro and Elba's expressions were similar to Luca's, which was no less than total astonishment.

"Seek the beast?" Luca repeated incredulously. "But why?"

"You must go—for your mother's sake."

"What about my mother? Why must I go for her sake? What does she have to do with me finding the beast?"

"Luca, the beast knows where your mother is."

All in the room were taken aback. A slight shiver ran from the top of Luca's head down to his tiny, young toes.

"Father, I don't understand. Are you saying that the beast knows where my mother is

buried?”

“No, Luca,” Druuk said with watered eyes. “Your mother is alive.”

A Mother's Lullaby

“*YOUR MOTHER HAS BEFRIENDED THE BEAST.*” Druuk’s words pounded on Luca’s chest as if they were being pummeled by a gruesome, battling hammer. The words made his breaths asthmatic, and he could no longer breathe inside that room.

“I didn’t want to tell you,” continued Druuk. “I didn’t ever want to tell you, but I knew that someday I would have to. I never realized it would be this soon, for I believe you’re still too young to know this truth, but I apologize for lying to you. Regardless of how you feel about me not telling you sooner, I believe I did what was right in withholding the truth about your mother. I knew that the minute I revealed your mother’s fate, you would immediately go searching for her.”

“You were right in believing that,” Luca replied testily.

“So I wanted to wait until you were old enough and until you had learned everything you needed to know, in both the martial way and in discernment. I don’t ask for your forgiveness; I don’t see a reason. As a father, I knew there was no alternative. You’ll understand this one day, Son. I was hesitant to even tell you this now.”

“Why did she go with the beast?” Luca said.

“Ah, that is the question, isn’t it?” Druuk said. “The *why* has been haunting me since the day you came into this world. I don’t know why, Luca, though I have my suspicions, but that is why you must find her.” Druuk was thrown into another tirade of devastating coughs, and he tried to reach for his cup of water but accidentally knocked it off the night desk and onto the floor.

“All right, you two, there’s been enough talking between princes tonight,” Elba said as she

pushed Luca aside and picked the cup up from the floor.

“And what exactly am I to do if I find her?” Luca said, fishing for an answer from his ill-stricken father.

“Help her,” whispered Druuk right as he began to drift off into sleep.

“Luca, let him be for now,” Elba said. “You can get answers in the morning. You, little prince, have had a long day. So many things have been overturned in your life. You need to rest. Please, Luca, we must take you to your chambers.”

“But my mother is alive,” Luca said with an erratic tone to his words, as if his mind was becoming unstable. “He just told me that my mother is alive! My *mother*—the woman in this picture.” Luca took out the drawing of his mother. “She’s alive!”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that now, is there?” Elba said. “It’s not like you’re going to go running off into the night to find your mother, eh? I won’t let that happen! Now, take my hand. We’re going to your room, and you *will* go to bed. You can think about her once you’re in your room, and you can scream ‘my *mother is alive*’ to your heart’s desire, but now we must let your father sleep. Is that understood, my prince?”

Luca was taken aback by her authoritative manner. “Yes, Elba.”

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s leave your father to his rest. Mastro Vohro will keep guard at your father’s side until morning. Now get behind me.”

Elba approached the door and readied herself to leave. Luca followed.

“Let’s make our way to your chambers,” Elba said, gesturing to him. “Don’t forget your sword.”

“Right, my sword,” Luca said as he doubled back. He took the sword, wrapped it up in the blanket and carried it in his arms. After recovering all of his things, he walked back to Elba.

“I’m going to go ahead of you, Luca,” she said. “Let’s move, and don’t place your thoughts on the sword. Keep them closed. Don’t let anything in.” Elba opened the door and stepped out of the room. Luca followed, but before he closed the door behind him, he took one last good look at his peaceful father resting on his bed. He shut the door and kept close to Elba.

Elba escorted Luca to his room, and before he went inside, she had some final words for him. “Luca, whatever you hear, whatever noises are outside your chambers, do *not* open this door. I’ll come back for you in the morning. Remember to get yourself ready for your exile before you go to bed. Sertu will arrive tomorrow with your belongings, and we’ll leave right at dawn to go see

your father and make our way to the school. Good night, my little prince.”

“Good night, Elba,” Luca said. “Thanks for guarding me on the way to my chambers.”

“It was my duty...but my pleasure as well,” Elba replied kindly. “Now hurry along, lad.” Luca stepped into his room and shut the door behind him, then locked it. Elba called for a guard that was near the stairs. “By the orders of the second prince, stand guard here by his son’s room, and don’t let anyone in. Understood?”

“Yes,” the guard said.

“Remember, keep your eyes where the light of the candle is not. What good is it to only heed those things that are illuminated?”

“Will do,” the guard said. Elba ran to the stairs and down she went, leaving the guard to keep watch by Luca’s room.

Luca’s guest room was small, but spacious enough to fit a modest bed and a large wooden study desk with a chair next to it. The walls were bare, except for a small drawing of the royal family perched up on the far wall. A lit candle atop the desk served as the only light in the room. Luca began to prepare to leave the next morning. He undressed down to his undergarments and set his clothes on the chair next to the desk. He set his mask on the table, and next to it, he laid the sword, which was still covered up in the blanket.

There was a small chest next to the desk where he kept his valuables. He knelt down in front of it, opening the lid. Inside were a number of journals, writing utensils, pictures, and keepsakes. He put them all in a soft travel bag, and then took the bag and walked up to the open window, leaning it up against the wall.

As he looked to the edge of the window, he saw a glimpse of something that looked like rope. He took the candle from the desk and shone the light on the window. He saw a length of rope going down the window and onto the ground outside. *Strange...who would do this?* He noticed a note next to the rope on the window ledge and reached for it.

Using the candle to light up the words, he read the letter. *Just in case you need to take an alternative route.* It was signed *Vohro*. He smiled.

He discarded the note right before plopping himself on the bed, for though a lot of stuff raced through his mind, his body was physically exhausted, and it called for much rest, so he laid back and just stared at the ceiling.

“My mother is alive,” he whispered. “My mother is alive,” he said louder. “My mother is

alive!” he said with passion. And he gave a giggle. “You’re right Elba, it’s quite silly.” He closed his eyes and fell into a dream.

He dreamt for hours. The total sum of all his exhaustions had culminated into a great resource for unadulterated and unequivocal sleep. Luca sailed the inner stories of his unconscious, and he played the part of the protagonist in the grand cosmic play which all souls do once they lay their minds to sleep.

Some people know there is a fine line between dreaming and memory, between memory as it could have been and memory as it truly was, and in his dream, Luca was experiencing one of these—but which one, the former or latter?

In his dream, he was a small infant, and he heard the echoes of elegance coming from the loveliest of sirens. He could not see this woman at first, but just heard her. It was a humming that was eternal, like the endless sound of waves brushing up against the diamond shore. He could not remember the beginning or ending of this song; it just was.

And the ethereal sound became more familiar, like the most comforting lullaby known to exist, specifically sung to comfort the world of men, harmonized in the vast trenches of the mind, where only truth existed and was not subjected to the personal whims of the ego. It was a soothing choral of croons, and the voice was that of a woman so exalted, that if one were to remember the dream, woe to them, for they would always feel unsatisfied with any other voice that was not of this woman.

Luca felt himself being held and rocked, as if nurtured into sleep by someone’s undying love. And he felt hair all over him, curly and soft, smelling of wildflowers and the scent of a mist that had collected over a shimmering meadow. In this state he kept himself, listening to the wonderful lullaby, and he found comfort in the arms of the strange woman that kept him secure and safe. But it could not last for long, for he did not belong in a dream. He belonged to a perilous world, a world where dark things were always on the prowl for the ruin of all. And inside his dream, he heard the woman speak, “Wake up, Luca. You must open your eyes.”

Luca awoke, and a terrible chill fell upon him. He quickly sat up and noticed that the candle had extinguished; the only light coming into his room was from the moon. His hands began to tremble, for it was getting abnormally cold inside his chambers. He arched his back, and he felt something, a sensation of a frozen hand clawing down the length of his spine with fingernails made of ice. When his teeth began to chatter, he realized it was time to stand up and grab the

thickest blanket he could find lying inside a small located in the wall just opposite the window. He threw it over himself and sat back down on the bed. A moment passed, and he felt the warmth of the blanket.

His stomach turned, and his leg uncontrollably shook up and down. He felt like a stranger in his own space. He went to the window and poked his head outside and saw nothing out of place, though it seemed as if the fog grew stronger and finally managed to cover the whole of the palace, but the fog had been lurking for a couple of days already, so it didn't seem strange to him. So what was it? What made him feel on edge? He had remembered some of the things his father had taught him of discernment, so he shut his eyes to take in the space inside the room and feel what needed to be felt.

He searched his one sense which was beyond all senses, the world which was beyond all worlds, and he felt another world, a world more expansive than his and one that was lined with an endless suffering. There, he found dark things. But so what? He knew of dark things had been around for days now. Why was this time so different? He tried harder, and he opened his spirit, his mind, to what troubled him. And he felt it, something familiar, something wicked—outside his door.

Out in the hallway, no light breathed about, for the few hanging lanterns that were vibrant just hours earlier had now been put out. The guard had been ambushed; he had been subdued by a foul thing. His head was being pressed into the concrete wall by something abnormal, a powerful hand. But this hand was not the size of an average person's—it was three times the size, as if someone's hand had grown in girth and elongated to become hideous. This monstrous hand was attached not to a monstrous arm, but an elegant one, a slender and regal arm. And the arm itself was attached to a lean body, tall and statuesque. The creature had taken all its strength and used it to squish the guard's head into the wall until all of his life had seeped out of him. It stood still with its ear less than an inch from the door. The nameless creature's eyes were deep black, and it did not breathe but just listened.

Luca approached his door and waited. He put his ear no less than an inch from the door to listen for anything foul outside his room. Both beings, one dark, the other innocent, had their ears pressed to the door with only mere inches separating them, both discerning, both thinking about their next course of action.

Luca felt the presence. He stepped away from the door, and the creature, sensing Luca's

awareness, raised its free hand to the door handle and grabbed it. It turned the handle and found that it was locked. The door handle turned and turned, making a creaking sound. The noise shuddered in the silence of the boy's room.

"Who's there?" Luca called, but no one answered. "Who's there, I said?!"

He heard nothing for a moment, but then began to hear a noise like a man struggling to breathe, as if he was wounded. The man's voice got louder and began to sound like moans. "Help," he heard, first as whispers, but then much louder seconds later. The man's moaning escalated as the handle of the door kept shaking. "Please help me," the man begged.

"Who are you!" Luca said fearfully as he stepped back some more and bumped into his desk, knocking down his unlit candle, which startled him.

"Open the door, please!" the man begged with a gruesome moan. "Please, now, please. Won't you help me! I'm the guard outside your door. I've been ambushed. I need you to open the door." The man's voice changed into something more hideous, "Now, boy!"

Immediately, Luca heard moans, but not just that of the one man, but several outside his door, as if there was an army of moaning souls outside his room. They tapped on the door fiercely, as if all of them were trying to get in. The moans intensified into screams, and the door began to shake off the hinges. Whatever it was outside was beginning to lose patience with Luca.

Luca was paralyzed at first but quickly regained his wits, and as if he was in automatic mode, he began to prepare himself to escape. He put on his clothes like a soldier would if he had only a few seconds to get dressed. Next, he put all his things that were important to him in his traveler's bag. He put on his mask and cloak. Lastly, he reached for the sword and secured it onto his back. The forces outside his room continued to bang on the door, and Luca trembled with a nervous chill, making it difficult for him to grasp onto certain things.

And the banging stopped, and silence was left to linger in the aftermath of the terror. Luca stood still in the stream of moonlight peeking inside his room, and he listened. What did he hear? It was a voice, and he heard clearly what it said.

"Nephew?"

Am Unbrador

LUCA'S WILDEST NIGHTMARES HAD COME TRUE. The Lady of the Sunless Land was at his doorstep, intent on claiming him for her own, and he was helpless; his father lay ill at the other end of the palace, and Luca was left to fend for himself. But Luca was also now a changed boy, and he had a certain confidence swimming inside of him. He quickly took charge of the situation and rushed up to the window to climb out, grabbing onto the rope attached to the desk. He climbed down to the ground as fast as he could, and as he did so, he heard a loud scream coming from his room, and then a loud crash, as if the door to his room was abruptly destroyed. He quickened his pace and rushed downward.

Touching ground, he pulled the rope all the way down towards him, dragging the corner desk so that it pushed up against the window. Using all of his might, he forced the rope to break off from the table leg and fall down. This way, Malasorta would not be able to use the rope to come after him—so he thought.

He wrapped his travel bag around his back and secured it tightly to his waist before taking off, running into the heart of the darkened moors. In all fairness, because of his wooden leg, Luca could only do so much running before his leg failed him. Unfortunately, being disabled was a hindrance in his ability to run as fast as the average human being, so Luca, though making a valiant effort, could do no better than a brisk jog. When he was close to about thirty yards from the palace, he had the urge to look back, and so he did.

Staring back at him was Malasorta, peeking out of his window to see where he had gone. A strange surge of energy came upon him, and his pace grew instantly—not much, but enough for

him to feel a difference. He felt the urge to look back one more time.

Malasorta was at the window, crouched on top of the ledge like some type of animal. Fearlessly, she jumped to the ground, effortlessly landing on the hard dirt. Standing up, she appeared to have grown in size, much taller than she was, and her hair had grown out so long that it reached the middle of her back, swaying back and forth like a triumphant flag of evil. She contemplated things for a second and then screamed at the moon. “Come to me, creatures of shadow,” she said.

With that command, the ground in front of her began to move, swirling like a whirlpool of dirt and rocks, until suddenly the earth was swallowed into a huge hole, and out of this hole, moans began to escape. Following the moans, humanlike creatures soiled from top to bottom began to crawl to the surface of the hole and out into the open air. Once they were exposed to the night, they screamed and howled at the moon. The creatures had awoken and were ready to feed on the people of the land, for you see, that was their sole appetite. These things that came from the ground, humans who were overtaken by shadow, who were animated not by life but by a central, sinister force, an evil not readily known to men, thirsted only for one thing—the human desire for pleasure. Vice in its purest form was what kept these creatures alive, for they sought to eat those who lusted for the things of the earth and sought to vanquish all who opposed them. Because of this, they were henceforth known throughout Esterra as the “visreh,” or the “kings of vice.”

Hundreds appeared from the ground with faces of black mist, waiting for Malasorta’s command. The front halves of their bodies were completely engrossed in shadow; this was the most interesting fact about the visreh.

“We have a prey to catch, children of the moon,” cackled Malasorta as she jumped across the hole and began to pursue Luca. Like a pack of wild animals, the visreh followed her.

She ran as speedily as a comet flying across the stars. In just a few seconds she had gained a great amount of space between her and Luca. The fallen jubahn tried harder to increase his speed but failed miserably at it. He felt helpless as he looked back and saw that Malasorta ran like a rabid beast. He could hear growls of rage coming out of her as she grunted with heavy breathing. Every second she pushed off her massive legs, the more ground she gained between her and Luca.

Alas, she reached him, but instead of pouncing on the young jubahn, she kept at his heels,

sporadically falling behind him, moving about his right and left sides in order to taunt him while he desperately tried to run. Glancing back at her, Luca saw a blackened, featureless face, and a sense of horror came over him.

“You can’t run away forever,” the lady-beast mocked with a guttural voice. She kept on him and would surpass Luca only to fall back once more, riding his back and breathing down his neck. She reached out with her claws, tearing at Luca’s flesh, forcing the young prince to scream in horror. “Run, little cripple, run!”

And that’s just what Luca did. He ran and ran but could not get away from the woman who had come to claim him as her own.

“My dear nephew, you *will* join us! And you *will* help us bring about the death of the sun!”

“No!” Luca said, swatting at her with his flailing arms.

Malasorta kept at his heels, taunting him like a cat would do to a little woodland critter. She growled and spat at Luca with her vicious monstrosity. And so *too* spat the visreh, slapping him across the face, taunting and degrading him.

The enormity of Luca’s desperation was eating away at his strength, and he began to lose feeling in his one good leg. His soul reached out of his body, to something indescribable and unfathomable, wondering what could come of it. At that instant, he remembered what his father had taught him earlier. So with nothing else left to lose, he closed his eyes and spoke the words.

“Umbrador, guardian of my light, come now in my hour of need.”

He opened his eyes and waited as he ran, yet nothing happened. He looked to the right and left, to the ground and to the sky, but saw nothing. He glanced back at Malasorta and witnessed a horrific form of a woman, with hands bigger than her head, with legs that were more muscular than those of a horse, and a face that was covered in darkness, with no visible features.

“Embrace me, nephew,” Malasorta said, reaching out for him.

But just as she spoke her words, Luca felt a gust of wind come from the east. He heard the sound of something that was like a tornado, and he sensed an immense object moving towards them at an incredible speed. The force grew stronger and louder, until finally, an unseen fury crashed into the lady-beast like a massive boulder smashing through the foundation of a sturdy castle. She was knocked off her feet and instantaneously thrown out of sight and into the air.

Luca kept running with that one good leg and a fierce limp that increasingly tested the fortitude of his wooden limb. Malasorta had vanished, yet the hideous visreh were still on his

trail.

And just as he scraped the depths of despair, his running, or to say, his movement, unexpectedly gained speed. As a matter of fact, it seemed as if he was being pushed by a gallant wind. Seconds later, he was running so fast that his feet lifted off the ground, and it took him a while to realize that he wasn't running at all but being carried by the wind, with his feet dangling a few inches from the ground. He was being pushed along, helped by some invisible force. He could feel it around his waist, as if this force had arms that grabbed and embraced him.

He turned to his right and saw a visreh gaining ground, but before it could reach for him, the creature was taken away, like if it was picked out of the air by something.

Luca glanced at his left and saw another visreh with his arms lunging at him, but then saw the creature lifted off its feet and pummeled to the ground, as if being picked up by a giant hand, like a toddler playing with a stuffed animal and pounding it on the floor with all its strength.

He looked to his rear and saw three visreh on the verge of pouncing on him. One was instantly crushed into pieces by a force of wrath, another was stretched from the arms and legs until it broke completely, and a third was flung into the air so far up it could not have been less than a mile high.

All of this happened, until no visreh were left, and though all of the visreh had been taken care of, Luca's speed increased with every second. Whatever pushed Luca meant to push him faster and faster, so he kept running with the unseen force, and he could see up ahead the edge of a cliff.

"Wait!" he screamed to the invisible force. "There's a cliff coming upon us! What are you doing? Stop pushing me! Please stop! We need to stop now! Let go of me!" But Luca's pleading was useless, for he kept rushing towards the cliff's edge, and it appeared to him as if he was going to go jumping off the cliff and to his death. There were only a few yards left, and at the speed he was going, he was sure to be doomed.

"Stop pushing me!" he said. "We're going to fall over the cliff!" And as Luca came upon the edge of the cliff, he instantly saw that the cliff went down at least a couple hundred feet, and to the opposite edge of the cliff, it must have been a crossing of half a mile or so, but as he feared for his life, he heard a voice whisper in his ear, "*Jump, Luca.*"

Jump the cliff? How could he jump half a mile? "Are you mad? I can't make that jump!" he said to the faceless air.

“Jump. I’ll make the jump with you.”

Left with no other choice, Luca reached the cliff and made the jump, and with the help of the unseen force, Luca leaped over what seemed to be hundreds of feet, and his silhouette crossed the image of the moon, making the half-mile jump with ease.

He reached the opposite edge of the cliff, landing softly on the ground, and he felt the embrace of the force leave him. He stayed upright and motionless for a number of seconds before falling to his knees and onto his back.

Luca felt lightheaded, having a hard time taking in what he had just experienced. His eyes opened and closed, drifting in and out of consciousness, but he fought it as best as he could. He sensed things around him that he had never sensed before, spiritual things, something otherworldly. He felt an overbearing presence, feeling a sort of pressure throughout his entire body, but it did not feel painful to him. Rather, he felt warmth, a supreme heat, yet it did not burn him or give him discomfort. But what it did give him was fear, but not a fear of death or of pain, but of immense beauty stemming from an immensity of reality, as if his whole world had been extremely amplified or doubled in size.

Again he went in and out of consciousness, desperately trying to focus on his surroundings. Mysteriously, the fog around him had completely disappeared, and he could see clearly into the night and across many yards of the moorish landscape.

“Don’t be afraid,” he suddenly heard. And with that spoken verse, all of his fears vanished as sudden as the torrential rains die in the eye of a hurricane. The voice seemed to have come from nowhere and everywhere, so it made it hard for Luca to pinpoint the exact location of the voice, and he struggled to turn his sights on whoever sounded off in such a way. But he need not look for the voice any longer, for a new world was about to be introduced to him.

As he was losing his battle with consciousness, slowly fainting into a deep sleep, his head, as if reacting automatically and without his permission, locked and honed in on the space in front of him. He saw what seemed to be a sparkle of light, like a firefly hovering in front of his body, and the sparkle grew bigger in form and appeared more like a bright star filling up the cosmos surrounding him.

The star grew in mass and took on a humanoid shape, and it kept growing taller until it reached and surpassed around eight feet of height. The grand being walked up to the young jubah as he steadily drifted off into unconsciousness, and before the being reached Luca’s feet,

it became transfigured into something remarkable.

The brightest plated armor happened upon the tall figure; it was of a metal that could outshine all that was in the land of Esterra. The armor covered the whole form, sparkling and glimmering in the shadows of the moon, and it was form fitting and flexible. The star-being walked up to Luca's side, and its starlit eyes shone through the armored helmet, and Luca's eyes could not bear looking at them much longer. Nonetheless, he felt the safest he had ever felt in his entire life.

"Are you a star?" he said, faintly.

"I am more than star, I am *Umbrador*," the being answered.

"An Umbrador?" Luca repeated before fainting into unconsciousness, and while he drifted along, he heard the star's last words.

"Rest now, my sweet prince, for tomorrow will be your last day in Bune."

The Banquet Before the Storm

IT TOOK LUCA A FEW SECONDS TO GET ADJUSTED to the light of consciousness once he opened his eyes, and after he had become aware of his surroundings, he sprung up from the floor, realizing he was in his father's room. He looked to the corner night table and saw Elba sitting down. On the table were Luca's mask and vest, and Elba seemed to have been using some tools to give them a good scrub and rinse.

"Morning, my prince," Elba said after giving Luca some time to regain his awareness.

"What?" Luca said. "How did I get here? What happened?"

"So full of questions this morning," Elba said.

"What are you doing with my mask?" Luca said, still drowsy.

"I'm polishing your things, making sure they're at least somewhat presentable, though most of the stains won't come off so easily," Elba replied as she kept scrubbing.

"Presentable for what?"

"You've been invited to the Banquet of Blades," Elba said. She put the items down and reached her hand out to give Luca a letter. Luca stood up, dusted himself off, and grabbed it from her hand. "A Massangah brought it by this morning," Elba continued. "It's from Siel. It's an invitation. You're to go as soon as possible."

"But I'm an exile," Luca pointed out. "Exiles don't go to the banquet."

"Well, they do now," Elba said as she approached Luca, handing him his vest and mask. "Put your things on. Come, now, quickly. Don't keep the Alta waiting."

"But, what happened to me? I was being chased by Lady Malasorta, and...then I saw a star.

How did I get back to the palace?”

“I think you know how,” Elba said, “and please whisper. Your father’s sleeping.”

“Was it the Umbrador?” Luca said while he put on his vest and mask. He saw his sword wrapped up on top of the night desk. He sighed in relief.

“Yes, you still have the sword,” Elba said. “It was still on you when you were carried over here. I myself was asleep when you came home. Don’t you remember anything about last night?”

“I remember being chased by the beastly lady and then hearing something. I saw a bright light, and it turned...human. Well, not human but in human form, and it was encased in armor.”

“Armor?” Elba said. “My, what a gallant guardian.”

“So you believe me?” Luca said. “You believe in them, in the elder stars?”

“Well, of course,” Elba said. “I see them every night; I just have to tilt my head up and they’re there.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Luca said scowled.

“I know what you meant, my prince,” Elba said, patting him on the shoulder. “When you grow older, young master, you’ll get to a certain point when you know certain beliefs need no more questioning, and believing in them is like believing in trees and rivers. I know what you speak of, but that’s something we’ll have to discuss later, seeing that you’re late for the banquet. Now, go and enjoy yourself with your friends, and make sure to consult with Siel about the sword. We leave for good once you return.”

Luca grabbed the blade and placed it on his back. “When my father wakes, please tell him I’ll be back soon. I’ll explain everything that happened.”

“Will do, my young prince,” Elba said as she watched him sneak out of the room.

Luca ran with urgency down the long, steep hallways of the grandiose school, for he knew he was late. After reaching the doors leading into the banquet hall, he burst in, exhausted from his excessive sprinting. Every year, after the completion of the Spadas, Davinians were called to the banquet table to partake in a great feast celebrating the accomplishments of that year. To the Davinians, the importance of fellowship and community were unequivocal. All Davinians were encouraged to come, including those from far out lands, and they convened in the banquet hall, a massive space that served as a vessel to rich bonding and friendly greetings.

The hall was spotless, smelling of fire and drink. It was exquisitely polished, yet retained a

charming comfort, like a warm blanket next to an embracing fire. Huge windows crowded the walls on both sides of the expansive room. At the rear of the hall stood what was most inspiring to all: the bare wall of the gorge cliff where the image of the Blademaker breathed in the natural essence of the rocky surface. The image itself was three stories high and was imprinted on the rocks, as if seeping forth from the crevices of the gorge's jagged skin. The image showed a vision of the Blademaker sitting among the rocks of the Bellowing Mountains. With his hammer in hand, he forged what were to become the nine blades of Daví. Under the image near the bottom was a small pool with an unnatural transparency. Inside the pool was a mixture of diamonds and sapphires, which gave out a variety of lights reflecting off the water, sending rays of pure beauty up along the surface of the cliff.

On the second-floor balconies, on the right and left walls, was the Davinian Boy Choir. They were dressed in white gowns that reached down to the tops of their feet. The robes were coated with white pearl sequins all throughout, and their collars were adorned with sapphires and diamonds. There was gold trimming running down their robes' lengthy sleeves. The boys' hoods were made up of layered silk, highlighted with various rows of diamonds.

The Choir sang with majesty, and their song was truth birthed from music. Their notes penetrated all who were present like waves crashing upon a brutish coral reef nestled along a turbulent shore; it left the Davinians with a taste of what was infinitely beyond the sandy shores and in the fathoms of the deepest seas. Smiles reigned throughout the hall.

The moment Luca stepped into the room, Siel approached him.

"You summoned me, Alta?" Luca said with his head slightly lowered.

"Yes, Luca," Siel said. "You're a Davinian, are you not? You must feast with us at the banquet. No one is denied a chance to do so. You have proven yourself to be in our fellowship. The feast is for the glorious *and* for the fallen."

"Thank you."

"Now, Luca," Siel said, "please show me *that* which I've felt you desiring to reveal to me."

Caught by surprise, Luca reacted to his words and quickly took the sword off his back. He fumbled with his hands as he began to unwrap it.

"Don't let your arms flail in such a manner," Siel said. "Keep your movements short so as to not attract attention."

"Right," Luca said. He calmed down and gently revealed part of the sword to the Alta's eyes.

“Jubahn, you have experienced much suffering, and yet you also have feasted on the glorious,” Siel said. “No earning of one’s blade could ever amount to the majesty that comes from grabbing a hold of this sword.”

“Then take it,” Luca said. “I bring it to you. I didn’t know what to do with it. It’s not mine. It came from the sky.”

“Then you must return it,” Siel said.

“Pardon?” Luca said. “I don’t understand. How can I return this to the sky?”

“If it doesn’t belong to you, you must return it,” Siel said. “You said so yourself; it does not belong to you. But, it *came* to you, and it’s in your possession, thus it’s yours for the moment. You must keep this sword with you until it can be returned to its rightful place.”

“But why me?” Luca said. “Why must *I* keep it? Why can’t you? Surely, you would know better how to protect it and keep it from harm.”

“Yes, I *would* know better,” Siel said. “But it’s not mine to protect. The sword came to you, not to me. The sword isn’t for me to do whatever needs to be done with it. You can’t give me what is not yours but has been given to you from above.”

“So this *was* given to me?”

“Yes, it seems so,” Siel replied, “and I can’t take it. Would *I* give you *my* Rasplendur? Neither should you give me yours.”

Siel’s words were a revelation to Luca, and he stood as if breathing had been lost to him. “My Rasplendur?” Luca said. “This is *my* Rasplendur?”

“Could it be anything else?” Siel said.

“But I’m not allowed to wield a Rasplendur,” Luca said.

“Well, *can* you wield it?” Siel said. “It seems to be covered in some unnatural crust, and I’m sure it’s incapable of cutting, thus it’s not useful. You must remove that dirt before you can use your Rasplendur.”

“And how do I remove the dirt, Alta?” Luca said.

“*That* you need to figure out during your exile,” Siel said. “Please wrap the sword back up and place it on your back.” Luca did so without hesitation. “Now, there is something else we need to discuss—about Lady Malasorta. Luca, I’m not surprised she came after you. It must have been terrifying for you, so I was happy to hear you had...help. Though, for now, keep it secret. Nobody knows what happened. Keep it that way, or too many people will start speculating, and

everything will be a mess to sort out. But most important of all,” Siel bowed his head near Luca, “do not go seek your mother.”

“My mother? You know about her? But father said—”

“I catch all secrets that are revealed the moment they are so. Luca, heed my words. I fear you aren’t strong enough to go on such a quest. Will you heed my wishes?”

“Yes, Alta,” Luca said. “I’ll do as you say.” He said this contrary to his real intentions, and he felt a nauseous gurgle slide down his throat, down to his stomach.

“Very well,” Siel said. “Go now and be with your friends,” Siel said with a smile, and then he retreated into the crowd.

When Luca turned his head, the first thing that graced his vision was Lereh of Heatheranla, who stood just a few yards away from him. Luca placed his eyes on the red-haired beauty, and feelings began to swell up inside. She stood in the middle of a crowd, and next to her was Prince Nefiru of Corco.

Nefiru was tall and with a slender, athletic build. Long, wavy mounds of brown hair were his mane, and he had dark eyes, the darkest Luca had ever seen. Nefiru was nothing less than princely; a true prince, not like him, soiled like the darkest shadows. What would a Flower want with a fallen jubahn when she had Nefiru to stare at? Luca noticed how Nefiru kept his eyes on Lereh and how she sometimes smiled at his grins. He suddenly had a dislike for Prince Nefiru, and a great scowl came over his face.

He turned his head to his group of friends and saw them staring back. Why were they staring at him? Better yet, why *wouldn't* they stare? He stuck out of the group. He was an unwanted, an exile. They were right to stare in such a way. Regardless, it still bothered him. But what hurt him the most was that all his close friends had been awarded *their* Rasplendurs, real ones, not something that came out of the sky. The gleaming hilts of their blades poked out of each and every one of their kingly ceremonial robes. But maybe the sword on *his* back was something truly magical? For now, though, it was covered full of dirt, akin to its new master. So Luca crept up to his friends, not knowing exactly how to greet them.

“I feel overdressed,” Luca said, breaking the ice. All of them could not help but give a warm smile.

“I don’t know,” Luleh smiled. “You might have forgotten to clean a couple of spots on your rush to get over here; which, by the way, you’re late.”

“Well, I have good reason,” Luca said, pointing to his mask and leg.

“That’s no excuse,” Lereh said as she joined the group with Nefiru following behind. She turned to Nefiru and introduced him. “Luca, this is Prince Nefiru of Corco.”

And all you hear is *prince* and *prince* as they greeted each other. Luca saw how Nefiru kept close to Lereh. His dislike for Nefiru grew even more—but Luca played nice.

“I’ve always wanted to set eyes on Corco,” Luca said. “I heard it’s beautiful.”

“It’s the most awe-inspiring place, a true shining city upon a hill,” Nefiru said.

“I’ve been there a few times during my travels,” Lereh said. “There’s nothing quite like it. It’s definitely more enchanting than this dreary kingdom. Maybe you can visit when you go away on your exile.” She said this in a not-so-nice manner but then realized how careless she’d been.

“Perhaps,” Luca said with kindness. “If you think so highly of it, Lereh, then it should be nothing short of glorious.” Lereh kept her mouth shut.

“Nefiru, your ren couldn’t possibly get any cleaner,” Luleh said as she eyed his shining ceremonial ren, beaming with the colors of his homeland.

“Yes, he’s quite princely,” Lereh added, her statement cutting through Luca like a dull blade. Luca now became even more self-conscious about his soiled appearance. He stepped back a bit, and surprisingly, so did Vehru and Pabru, knowing quite well their friend was dealing with a bout of insecurity and needed their support.

“So, are you forced to wear that mask at all times?” Nefiru said. Lereh did not like the comment, and her eyes expressed her sentiment to Nefiru.

“It seems so,” Luca replied, “except for when I go to sleep and all.”

“Well, you have a pleasant face,” Luleh said. “I do miss seeing it.”

“I don’t miss it at all,” Pabru smirked, not surprisingly.

Luca took notice of Lereh and how she had a hard time keeping her eyes on him. “Does my mask make you uncomfortable?”

“I figure it would make everyone uncomfortable,” Nefiru said.

“Why would it?” Lereh said. “Nothing scares me.”

“So it’s scary then?” Luca said. Lereh remained silent.

“Did the Alta ask you to come?” Vehru said, breaking the awkward pause.

“Yes, I was summoned,” Luca said.

“That was nice of him,” Nefiru said. “Exiles aren’t usually allowed to partake of the

fellowship. He must have other reasons for you to be here.”

“I think you can quit fishing for conspiracies,” Vehru said.

“Yes, quite a bore,” Luleh said. And to change the subject, “What’s that on your back?”

Luca thought about the answer for a second and opted for the truth. “It’s my Rasplendur.”

There was an uncomfortable silence between friends as they all gasped. Then smiles came across their faces.

“You don’t want to tell us what’s really under there?” Luleh said.

“It’s not the right time,” Luca said, playing along. “It’s secret for now.”

“For now,” Lereh said, taking Nefiru’s arm and dragging him away.

“Fair enough, friend,” Vehru said. But Luca could not hear his friend’s words, or at least appeared so, for he kept his eyes on Lereh as she walked away with her hand on Nefiru’s arm, and Luca for the first time desired to be a true prince, born of nobility, beaming in a set of glorious robes—but Luca was nothing of the sort. To save his disposition, he quickly changed the subject.

“So, you have that leg of mine?” Luca asked his friends.

“Oh, so you heard?” Luleh said.

“My father told me about it,” Luca said. “It was quite stupid of you guys to head out at night to look for a strange metal. Yet, it was pure excellence at the same time. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Vehru said. “It was a bit of fun, until we ran across the dark warrior.”

“I wish I could have been there to fight with you guys,” Luca sighed.

“With things how they are at the moment, you still might get that chance,” Luleh said.

“I’m not one for fighting,” Pabru said. “I’d rather eat. When is this thing going to start?”

And as if in perfect timing, the bell sounded off.

“Looks like someone heard you,” Luca said.

Vehru, Pabru, and Luleh huddled together, waiting for Siel’s instructions. Nefiru and Lereh returned to join them, including another boy named Tamru, a seventh-blade from the region of Nawa, a land in the northeastern part of Esterra characterized by many lakes and lakefront dwellings. He was of fair skin, and his hair was the color of autumn’s embrace. He was thin, yet never prone to getting hurt, and he always walked with a smile spread across his face.

Luca kept his eyes on Nefiru and Lereh, and gaining an ounce of confidence, he put himself between Tamru and Nefiru. “Tell me, prince of Corco,” Luca said. “I’ve heard my father speak of

another, older Davinian school. Is it true that there is a second Blade School of Daví in your kingdom?”

“Yes there is, and I’ve been to it many times,” Nefiru said, “but never inside. It’s forbidden. It has been abandoned, and it must stay that way.”

“Why is that?” Tamru said.

“Because it was the Blademaker’s final wish,” Nefiru said. “At least, according to Davinian lore, that is. And since it is so, we have placed a thousand guards around the school; this has been done for a hundred years or more. Since I was born, I have always known it to be the ‘School of a Thousand Guards.’”

“Humph,” Luca said. “I would still like to see it someday. How hard is it to sneak into?”

“Were you not paying attention?” Nefiru said. “It’s guarded by a—”

“Yes, a thousand guards,” Luca said aggressively. “Maybe I should pay a visit to Corco like you said, when I am on exile, and see these *thousand guards*. For depending on how they hold their heads, to the ground or to the sky, I should be able to sneak in. But not like a thief!”

Nefiru wondered what he meant. “That would be a dangerous plight,” was all he said.

“There’s nothing more perilous than life under a sunless land,” Luca said. “More dangerous than a thousand guards, anyway.”

Sensing Luca’s aggressiveness, Lereh took hold of Nefiru, and they broke off from the two boys, heading inside the banquet hall.

“I should like to see that school as well,” Tamru said with a smile. “I know I can’t go with you on your exile, but I would definitely meet you there.”

“The more the merrier,” Luca said right before Siel stood up on his throne and whistled for everyone to take their places.

One after the other, the Davinians made their way inside the banquet hall and lined up along the room in equal number so that you had half of them on the right wall and the other half on the left. Adorned in their feasting robes, the Davinians resembled rows of shimmering gems, like polished soldiers dressed to salute their highest-ranking general.

Mastros Jeskun and Gehwen walked the rows of Davinians, making sure they were up to the highest standard. As Mastro Jeskun reached Luca and his pal Vehru, he gave them a warm smile, and to Vehru, his new partner-in-combat, he also handed him a friendly punch to the chest. Jeskun’s appearance was kingly, with a robe that spoke of mastery in combat, and on his left eye

he wore a black and red patch outlined with small rubies. In the center of the patch was the Davinian crest of nine blades in the midst of a flaming sun. He walked past the boys to continue his inspection.

In the middle of the hall was an enormous dining table stretching about fifty yards in length. It was enhanced by the most regal of cloths and dinnerware. The long benches on both sides of the table were enough for a few hundred men to sit and eat.

“My dear souls,” Siel began with his hands stretched out. “Thank you for attending our annual banquet. I know some of you have traveled from far lands and from the many regions of Esterra, but I can assure you, it was all done for a worthwhile cause: to partake in the annual bountiful feast at the table of plenty.

“Davinians, you all know that following the annual tournament we take time out to look back on the previous year to celebrate our accomplishments and reflect on our failures. It’s a great time for us to seek and learn from the past, and to foresee and prepare for the future. We must keep the light that we carry within us from diminishing. We must see to it that it transfers from the past year and into the next one without any saturation; it must be like it once was. It must be constant. That is why we keep our eyes on the past. Our past lights our future.

“And now, brothers, we must refresh our inner lights with a feast. It’s time for merrymaking—and for our most important role as Davinians, that of servitude. We will feast on the feasting of others as we’ve always done since the beginning of the Order.” Siel looked to Mastro Gehwen, who stood next to the banquet hall doors, which had been closed after all of the Davinians had come in.

“The Banquet of Blades has commenced. But before we bring in our guests, I would like to mention one more thing.” The crowd grew curious. “After an unexpected turn of events that have occurred in recent days, the school will be closed starting tomorrow.”

There was talk and whispers within the majority of Davinians. Each one had their own suspicions.

“I’m afraid we have drifted into perilous times,” Siel said. “Most of you have taken notice of the fog that has intruded into our land. This fog brings with it a darkness that must be apprehended immediately. For our safety and the safety of others, we will cease with school activities until further notice.”

The many souls who stood before Siel were either speechless or vocal; they sensed that their

world was about to be overturned.

“I hope that we’ll be able to clear away this darkness without much effort so we can strengthen the rays of the sun, and we’ll be able to resume our curriculum once again. Please don’t ponder too much on the matter. Have faith that we’ll resolve it in a timely fashion. And now let us move on to better things. Mastro Gehwen? Would you please open the doors and let our friends in?”

Gehwen opened the doors to the banquet hall, and as if the mastro had popped a cork from an overflowing bottle of ale, the guests rushed in. Who were these guests? They were the people of the land: the peasants, the farmers, the goat herders and the home caretakers, the merchants and the wanderers. All of them were from Bune, for you see, what was unique about the Banquet of Blades was the lottery held every year, a lottery that allowed for the people to come in and feast on the table of plenty; this was the sole purpose of the feast.

The common people entered the hall, and just as one would react when setting foot inside a new and marvelous home, they rushed in and gawked at the transcendence of the place. Elation spread over their faces. Some were nervous, and some had the face of fear, for a grand hall such as the one they stepped in was nothing they could ever dream of, much less actually witness in person. As they came in, all of the Davinians stood along the walls and welcomed them with smiles and nods.

Siel motioned for the guests to sit down. The people took their places on the table, starting from the front all the way to the back, all of them sitting and grinning, adults and children alike. The people of the land had their best garments on, at least what they could afford for such an occasion. Some only had what they wore on a daily basis, for they didn’t have the means to pamper themselves for such an event. No matter. The feast welcomed all, and they were to be served as kings.

Siel snapped his fingers, and all of the Davinians turned and marched towards the end of the banquet hall. Each side had a door leading to the private kitchens behind the room. As fast as they went in, they came out. Each Davinian had something to share with the people, whether it was a large pitcher full of wine or ale, or a massive plate with food piled on top. The students hovered among the gargantuan table, setting food-filled plates down or pouring drink into the many cups waiting to be filled.

Luca came out of the kitchen behind Pabru and Vehru. He carried a pitcher of wine while his

two friends had platters of food to spread around.

“Good luck with that,” Luca said as he parted from his friends.

“Don’t get any wine on the guests,” Vehru said.

Hours passed, and the people dined on the treasures that were brought out to them. Luca made his rounds, offering up wine for those who wished for it and stopping to talk and share a laugh with some of them.

But not all were so welcoming to the outcast. A few people were frightened by his appearance, and others were downright fearful of him. One peasant went as far as even taunting him as he approached to offer up some wine.

“Should I fill your cup, sir,” Luca said in a kind manner.

The man just looked at Luca, dismissing him in such a manner that it bothered the jubahn down to the bone. “You know how silly you look with that thing on your face?” the man said. “Say, why do you have a drawing of a shooting star across your eyes anyway? What does that mean?”

“More wine, sir?” Luca said with a smile.

“I reckon you don’t have many friends, not with that thing on your face,” the man said. “And your clothes are dirtier than mine. Maybe *I* should be the one serving you, don’t you think?”

Luca eyeballed the man and thought about pouring the wine all over his head, but he was a Davinian, and such a thought died instantly. He put his hand on the man’s shoulder and instead showed kindness. Luca filled his cup and moved along to another.

When he got a chance, Siel locked eyes with Luca, and he motioned for Luca to take off his mask, for he felt Luca’s discomfort. But Luca raised his hand, as if to say to Siel that it was okay; he did not need to remove his mask. He wanted no special considerations.

After he had finished his rounds, Luca went and stood against the wall to wait until the guests required more drink. He stood in the midst of the other Davinians, who shined like polished gems in contrast to his muddy self. His dark, earthy colors broke the enchantment of the dynamism radiating from the other students’ robes. The only vibrancy bouncing off Luca was the silver gleam of his mask, which up until then had been scaring the majority of the people he had served. The other Davinians had subtly distanced themselves from him so as to not defile their bodies with his presence; he was like a shadow discarded to the side, for people were not keen in being reminded of their fallen nature.

Music began to play for the entertainment of all, and most of the guests raised themselves up and started to dance. Children, parents, and lovers, all of them jumped up and danced in whatever spot they could find. Even some of the Davinians who were going about their rounds found some time to stop and enjoy the music by dancing with each other. Luca's eyes scanned the dancing mob, and he was pleased for them.

He ended up on a certain couple, and his eyes bloomed. He saw Lereh being twirled around by Prince Nefiru, and for a moment, it seemed as if Lereh had a small smile spreading across her face. And as she danced, her locks of hair spun around and softly slapped the tall prince's face, to his delight. Luca turned his focus on their dancing legs, and he reached down to feel his own false limb. Luca's eyes grew weary, and he bowed his head for a moment.

Soon, Vehru and Pabru joined him.

"They don't stop eating!" Pabru said, resting his back against the wall.

"It's like they haven't eaten for ages," Vehru said as he placed himself next to Luca.

"What did you expect?" Luca said. "It's the same every year."

"I'm surprised I still have both my hands," Pabru said.

"The fact they were this hungry should tell you something," Luca said, "that they were in need of a fullness that only a feast like this could give them. It's a good thing that we do this."

"Yes, very good," Vehru concurred.

"I think I'm going to head back to the kitchen to refill my plate before I go back," Pabru said. "You guys stay here and look after my people."

"Oh, what would they do without you?" Vehru said.

"Starve, apparently," Pabru said as he walked away from them.

Vehru turned to Luca, for he wanted to say something but couldn't get the courage to muster up any words. But Luca made the effort instead.

"I saw an Umbrador last night."

"What? Like a drawing?"

"No, I *saw* one," Luca said more adamantly, "an *Umbrador*—with my own eyes. I tell you this because you are my best friend."

"Then as your best friend I tell you that your eyes deceive you. Umbradors aren't real. And even if they were, they'd blind you, since stars are incredibly bright."

"You can see them if they move about in armor."

“Armor? An Umbrador in armor? It sounds to me like you’ve been sipping out of your jug.”

But before Luca had a chance to reply, he heard the call from the Alta for silence, and the boys stood in attention with their mouths shut.

“People of the land,” Siel said, raising his arms. “We hope you’re enjoying your bountiful feast.” A roar came over the entire hall. “Good, good. We’re here to serve, and we’re glad your stomachs have been filled and your spirits renewed. But it’s not over. While you finish your plates, we would like to offer up some entertainment.”

Siel motioned to the right and left of him, and when he did so, a number of Davinians came out ready to put on a show. They walked around to both sides of the plentiful table and started performing feats of talent. There were poets, singers, fire breathers, a juggler of swords and even a contortionist, who above everyone else had the children’s utmost attention.

Vohro came out as one of the performers. His trick was the speed and precision in which he wielded his blades. He walked up near one of the group of peasants and started twirling his blades so fast that no one could actually see the blades but only hear them ringing in their ears. The crowd breathed in excitement, for to them it appeared as something of a miracle. All were amazed, except for one who thought of it as mere play.

“That doesn’t seem so special; I know many people who can twirl a blade about without problem,” the man said. “Is there anything else you can show me so I can believe you to be special?”

Normally, Vohro would not oblige such indulgent requests, but some things needed to be done for all to believe. He reached onto the man’s half-eaten plate and picked up a small bean, and without hesitation, he flicked it into the air, and with his eyes still on the man, his arm sprung up quickly, like he had a sudden nervous twitch, and all that was heard was a sharp *slice* in the air. The poor bean landed on the table, split in two pieces, with Vohro’s eyes still glued on the man’s face.

The man took a look at the bean and exclaimed with passion, “He cut the bean in two without even looking!”

He looked up to Vohro and saw that the mastro was holding up his hand, showing four fingers as if to say, *Actually, I cut it into four*. The man turned back to the table and saw that the bean truly *was* cut into four parts instead of two.

“But this is impossible,” the man said.

“But it was done,” Vohro said, withdrawing himself from the table and onto another group for more entertaining. The people were taken aback, and all were amazed.

Luca and Vehru watched in awe as Vohro entertained the guests. Pabru returned with a full plate. “I’m back!” he said, trying to balance the heavy plate on his one arm.

“We’re saved,” Luca said.

“All is good with the banquet now,” Vehru added.

“I bet you guys enjoy picking on me,” Pabru said.

“There’s a sense of fun it, yes,” Vehru said with a smile.

“Anyway, Luca, I feel there’s this odd tension between you and Lereh,” Pabru said as he took a piece of meat from his plate and chomped down on it.

“Pardon?” Luca said.

Pabru discreetly pointed with his dirty finger. Luca turned to where Pabru was pointing and saw that Lereh had her eyes on him.

“I think she’s looking at Vehru,” Luca said.

“No, no, she’s looking at you,” Pabru and Vehru said in unison. “So why don’t you go find out what she wants,” Pabru added.

“Well, maybe *I should* go and find out,” Luca said with a newfound confidence.

“Precisely,” Pabru said. “And good luck.”

Luca bravely took his first step towards her, but was abruptly stopped by a sound coming from one of the peasants.

“I need a fill!”

“Your plans have been thwarted, my friend,” Vehru said. “Maybe next time.”

“We’ll see,” Luca said as he rushed up to the table to pour more wine in the empty cups before him. For the most part, they were thankful for his service. He did not care; he did not do it to be praised.

As he made his rounds down the table, he shot a glance at Lereh, who walked with her pitcher of ale towards him on the opposite side of the table. She was busy filling some of the empty mugs on the table, and as Luca stared at her, he began to fear that he was becoming too fond of the red-haired beauty. After all, she was a beautiful seventh-blade, and he was a disabled exile. Unexpectedly, Lereh turned her head towards Luca, and their eyes met, and instantly both sets of eyes darted off into another direction, as if to say “*oops.*”

Luca felt awkward, so he tried to focus on something else, and he did, for his attention was caught by the Davinian choir on the second floor. The choir began singing, and it was nothing short of ethereal. The people of the land looked up above, rejoicing with elated eyes and wide-open mouths at the magnificent sound raining down on them. The children's eyes were smitten with reverence, as if they saw so much more than the adults could ever see of the special choir.

Alas, the song ended. Everyone in the hall took in a big breath and exhaled their worries away. But before the crowd was able to continue with their feasting, the Davinian choir did something unexpected. Immediately following their performance, the choirboys took off their robes of diamonds, pearls, and gold and threw them down towards the people; it was like a shower of treasure pouring down on them.

The robes fell on the table and on some of the people. They were for the people of the land to keep. The guests rejoiced, and the Davinians applauded with approval. Never had the people of the land seen such beauty and riches in their lives, and it was all for them to have. Their spirits had been lifted and transfigured into something invaluable; truly they had been awarded many things that night.

As the guests' elated spirits drowned much of Luca's inner senses, he could not shake off the feeling of an impending doom. It came from out of nowhere and stabbed him in the back like an assassin coming out of the darkness. It felt to him as if the sharp pain had come from the distant horizon, where the palace stood. Luca was troubled, and he broke off from the rest of the group as they cheered on the choir, making his way towards one of the big windows that showed the royal palace in the distance.

Pabru and Vehru realized their friend had broken off from the crowd, and wondered why. Siel caught a glimpse of Luca's retreat, and the Alta felt a sense of foreboding. Vohro started to cut through the crowd to reach Luca, for he too felt something odd.

Luca reached the window and set his eyes on the darkness of the dusk, but he saw nothing but peace. Something was not right, so he kept his eyes on the palace, curious to why he felt so strange. And when his eyes had finally grown tired of straining to diffuse the darkness of shadow, it happened.

The first *BOOM* rang out in the air, and a grand fireball exploded from the depths of the palace, shooting upward into the night's sky and lighting up the surrounding areas.

All in the banquet hall were terrified.

The Burying of the Land

-part one-

“*MY FATHER’S STILL IN THERE,*” whispered Luca to himself. “There’s no way that I’m going to let him die alone.” He turned towards Vehru. “I’m breaking away; I’m going to the palace to face this darkness that’s come for us!”

“No, you won’t,” Pabru said as he appeared next to Luca, holding him back.

“Let go of me!” Luca said. “I’m not just going to let my father burn in flames!”

“That’s not for you to decide, Luca,” Vehru said. “You’re still a Davinian. Your place is here with us, not at the palace. We must wait for Siel’s command. He’ll know what to do.”

Vohro reached the crowd of Davinians standing near the windows, and he saw the rain of fire and dirt that had come upon the vulnerable palace. Using his bountiful eyes, he also noticed a massive amount of humanlike creatures scaling the palace walls, climbing from every angle imaginable.

“Alta, the land is under siege!” Vohro said, turning to Siel. “The palace is overrun with vile creatures, it seems. They’ve brought fire and dirt with them, and they are shadowed!”

Siel acknowledged his loyal servant and turned to the crowd, but not before hearing a crashing sound reverberating throughout the school.

“SILENCE!” screamed Siel. The Alta focused on the sound, which had seemed to come from the entrance to the school. Siel closed his eyes, and his ears stretched outward like those of a dog whenever a distant sound attracts its attention. With each passing second, the sound became clearer to every Davinian in the room: it was a clashing of lances. The Gohrgos of the Golden Doors were in battle. War had come upon the Davinian School.

Siel took both his hands and raised them to the air, giving his Davinians the sign of war. Without question, all of them obliged, dropping all that they carried: platters, pitchers, bowls, plates, and whatever other things they had in their hands. For a few seconds, all that was heard was the shrill sound of loud bangs and clangs from various objects hitting the ground.

The Davinian Choir, who were third-blades above anything else, quickly jumped over the railing and down to the first level simultaneously. They landed squarely on their feet with little damage to themselves.

Siel spread his arms to his side, instructing his students to go *all blades*, meaning to disrobe down to their vests. Every single Davinian complied in unison, as if practiced and infinitely rehearsed—all except for Luca, of course, for as an exile, he could not wield his blades—not that his wooden blades would have done him any good.

“Stay close to me,” Vehru said, turning to Luca.

“Mastro!” said one servantu. “The fog is consuming the land.”

“Teacher!” said another one. “The fog brings a storm of dirt. It rolls in from all corners of the horizon!”

“We must see our guests to safety!” cried Jeskun. “Davinians! Gather up the people of the land and take them to the passageway leading to the catacombs.”

The guests, who were consumed with dread and uncertainty, were quickly gathered up and led to an opening on the floor near the rear of the hall, leading down a passageway towards the Davinian catacombs.

“Prepare for battle!” Mastro Gehwen commanded, ordering all Davinians to draw back from the front of the hall and to stay in small groups for solidarity. “These unknown creatures have suddenly come upon us and have laid siege to our school. Treat them as you would treat any other vile thing of the night!”

Following the mastro’s words, the hall shook as if thunder had come down and rattled the insides of the hall. The shaking was so violent that it caused some of the guests to fall on their backs and knees. Candles and lanterns fell and burst onto the floor, which forced the students to quickly act, extinguishing them before a threatening fire broke out. The hall grew dark.

“Alta!” cried out one student. Siel had somehow fallen to his knees and now struggled to get up. It seemed that the last blow to the school had affected him in a physical way, as if a blow to the school was a blow to his body. Vohro raced to the Alta’s throne to help him up, and after a

moment, Siel regained his composure.

A fog began to creep into the hall from below the doors, seeping in from the cracks and open vents spaced around the room.

“The fog, Alta!” Tamru said, spotting the gray smoke seeping in from the other side.

“Don’t mind the fog, good lad,” Siel said. “The fog is the least of our problems. Let the fog be. It’s not the fog that’s our doom, but what it brings to us!”

Vohro zigzagged among the mass of Davinians until he came to the large dining table in the middle of the hall. If there was to be a battle, then the table would be an obstacle, so he ordered his students to grab as much table as possible and move it to the rear of the hall in order to create some space near the front. A huge number of Davinians began with *heave-hos* until they moved the imposing table all the way to the end.

Siel called for Mastro Jeskun. “Bring the novotals to me *and* the fallen jubahn. Quickly now.”

“Yes, Alta,” Jeskun said. He made his way collecting the newly birthed, those who had not yet been ordained servantus and thus could not wield their Rasplendurs. They all came to see the Servantu Alta, all of them with eyes and ears of confusion and curiosity, especially Luca, who felt as if the Alta had made a mistake including him with everyone else.

“Kneel,” Siel said, “including you, young exile.” And so they all knelt. Siel raised his hands. “By the authority given to me by our beloved Blademaker, by the great Mors of the sky, and by the endless truths that we know, I proclaim you fit to wield your Rasplendurs. Go now, young servantus, and show this evil the wrath of Davinian steel. Rise!” And all stood in front of their Alta, all new servantus, transformed and lively!

Meanwhile, the Flowers of Heatheranla stood near a corner of the room, flipping through their blades, making sure they were clean and sharp.

“I’ll go protect the exile,” Lereh said.

“His name is Luca.”

“I know that. You know what I mean.”

“Why him?”

“Why do you think we’re being ambushed?” Lereh said as she sheathed her blades. “They want him.”

“Well, you go to him, but I’m staying behind. I’ll go wherever the fight takes me.”

“As in towards Vehru?”

“Be quiet!” Luleh said, punching her sister in the arm.

“Good luck, then,” Lereh said. “Keep your wits about you.”

The Flowers separated and lost themselves in the mass of students. Over by the windows, where Vehru still remained, Pabru grabbed his friend’s arm. “Don’t you think we should move away from the windows,” he said, pulling Vehru away towards the center of the hall, but not before bumping into Nefiru, who seemed calm as ever.

Jené Jenóu, a dapper young servantu with sparkling emerald eyes, sporting an emerald-green mane, strode up to Nefiru. “You seem ready,” he said.

“I’m in the mood for a fight,” Nefiru said triumphantly.

“You never fail to amaze me with your arrogance,” Jené said, setting himself next to Nefiru. “I should stand by your side so as to keep an eye on you lest you get cut down by your blindness.”

“Well, if it’s your wish to see me slay what is to come, then watch and learn,” Nefiru said, raising his blades to his chest.

“All in good time,” Jené replied.

Nefiru walked up to a small table near them. It was covered with pitchers of ale and water. He grabbed the table and turned it on its bottom, and everything came crashing down. He pushed the table towards the center of the room, where the swarm of students hovered, and he stood it on its legs once more. He jumped on top and cried out to everyone, “Here I can see clearly who is coming for me!” Then he turned to Jené. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re a madman,” Jené said, jumping on top of the table.

Across the way, Luca had dispersed from Siel, finding his way back to his friends. “I’m going to make my way to the palace,” Luca said with a serious look.

“Have you lost your wits?” Vehru replied. “The palace is overtaken. And you wouldn’t last a second in the dirt storm that surrounds it.”

“But I must get to my father!”

“Even if you wanted to go, how would you get out?”

“I can take the passageway that leads outside from the catacombs.”

“Even so, you must defend the school *and* the High Servant. It’s your duty as a Davinian. You must act like one!”

“You’re right, Vehru,” Luca said, defeated. “I’m just conflicted.”

“I understand, Luca,” Vehru said compassionately. “Stay near me, okay? I’m sure your father’s all right.”

“Stay close to me also,” Pabru said with a smile. “You might learn something.”

Unexpectedly, there came a silence outside of the hall, as if the war outside the school had ceased to be, and all you could hear were the sniffles and coughs of the crowd waiting to thrust itself into battle. Nervous energy reigned.

Siel returned to his throne and sat down. The Alta need not fight in such battles. He had already fought a lifetime of wars, and it was considered ill mannered for anyone or anything to force him to unsheathe his blades, so he waited with patience.

When a few tense minutes had passed, there came a knocking at the door, as if one solitary person was leisurely wandering about the school, and in good measure, took their hand and knocked at the door as if to say, “*Can I come in?*”

“Who’s going to open the door?” a voice rang out, and everyone in the hall broke out in laughter, and their spirits were lifted—but not for long.

Seconds later, there was a loud *slam* on the door, as if that solitary person who had just knocked on the door had turned into a legion of warriors who carried with them the biggest battling ram known to man and had succeeded in breaking thunder against the formidable doors.

And then a second *slam* on the doors, and the hall shook about as if it were being tossed and turned by a merciless giant.

Alas, a final *crash* tore the doors asunder, and a legion of visreh spewed in like an overflowing dam releasing an endless stream of water.

The visreh rushed in without any purpose except to exert their hatred for the innocent. To them, the Davinians were fresh meat, something they could sink their teeth in. The first solid wave of visreh dashed in and pummeled the front line of Davinians. For the most part, the visreh were struck down once they hit the Davinian wall, but for those that were left standing, the frenzy of arms and blades that followed the crash soon took them apart. The Davinians’ combat was like poetry birthed from splendor, with the many blades like pens, and they would write with the blood of their enemy long verses of harmony between blade and master, sonnets of valor and expert precision. Skillfully waving their arms, the students appeared like militant conductors of an operatic bloodbath, and they painted the walls with the notes of battle.

But there were some Davinians that were doomed by fate to be the feast of many beasts. Hundreds of visreh ran in, and they outnumbered the Davinians ten to one, so it was inevitable that some would fall to the black teeth of the shadowed humans. The minute they broke into the hall, many visreh leaped onto the bountiful feast awaiting them, taking down many Davinians, feasting on their flesh.

Luleh broke off from the rest of the group and kept her eye on her sister, who made her way towards Luca. But when Luleh turned her gaze away from her sister and to her front, she saw three hungry visreh coming her way. She sheathed her Rasplendur and quickly took out her twin blades.

The three creatures approached her carefully and lunged towards her all at once. Luleh crossed her arms in such a way that her chest was forced to spring her arms out forward, as if it was using her own movement to catapult her swings, amplifying her slashing prowess. Her arms flung out, and her blades mercilessly tore apart two of the visreh's necks, sending them to a lifetime of darkness.

The third creature managed to slip by her blades, and it got behind Luleh and grabbed her by the hair, jerking her head in a forceful manner. This act angered her so much that she quickly snuck in one of her arms under the creature's left armpit and immediately threw the creature on the floor. And before the creature had a chance to raise itself up to its feet, Luleh had already managed to begin a terrible full-body spin, and in the middle of that spin she grabbed her Eturita, and as the creature was just about to stand on its two feet, Luleh finished her hurricane spin.

A damning blade came out of her spinning mass straight towards the visreh. Her Eturita struck the creature's mouth with so much force that the visreh was thrown back no less than five feet, hitting the floor so hard that it broke into a mess of black sludge. Such was the force of the younger Flower of Heatheranla. Luleh retrieved her blade and advanced towards the next victim with a scowl that would have cut the most hardened of men.

Further in the hall, Nefiru and Jené were on top of the wooden table they had set up for themselves. With each creature that came upon them, they cut through the visreh as if it was child's play. The two warriors complimented each other, working as a team and looking over each other's shoulder, making sure that all angles were secured. Not one visreh was allowed to jump on the table with them. Such was the speed in which they cut through the onslaught of creatures.

“Don’t you even dare raise yourself up to us!” Nefiru said.

One daring yet careless visreh tried to make its way up to them, but Jené managed to impale it with his Rasplendur before it touched the surface of the table. And using all of his might, Jené moved the creature towards Nefiru, who instantly took out his Shesta and carefully slashed the creature’s life out of it.

“Off my table!” Jené shouted, throwing the dead carcass back into the mass of warriors, though by accident managing to hit a few of his Davinian compatriots. “Sorry about that!” he added.

Near the rear of the hall was Pabru, who had broken off from his friends and had taken his newly earned Rasplendur to wreak havoc on the creatures laying siege to the school. Though Pabru had always been known to be somewhat of a crackup, it did not show in his combat, for he was a Davinian before anything else, and it was truly impressive how he dealt with the visreh. One cut was all it took; he made his blows count on each and every creature. He would cut to his right and left without setting his eyes on his enemies; his focus was impenetrable.

That is, until a sly visreh crouched down and bit into Pabru’s right ankle, forcing him to fall to his knees and drop his Rasplendur. But Pabru reacted with speed, and found a big turkey leg lying on the floor next to him. He grabbed it and pummeled the visreh in the face as hard as he could. But as expected, it didn’t really bring it any harm, so he dropped the turkey leg and took the great, silver tray that was on the floor next to the leg and used that to smack the living snout out of the visreh, and because it was done with such force, the visreh’s head tore completely off and fell next to Pabru’s wounded leg. Pabru grabbed his Rasplendur and stabbed the visreh’s head with it, and he raised the head to himself and let it slide off his blade, until finally it was loose enough for him to kick it with his wounded leg.

“Munch on this!” Pabru said, kicking the head straight across the room and almost into the hands of his friend.

“Good grief!” cried Vehru. “I have to watch out for dead ones as well?” He kicked the head out of his way, and when he did so, two visreh ambushed him from the front. They came in with their claws and teeth, and as fast as they opened their mouths, Vehru took out the blades on his hip and launched them at the creatures’ heads.

His blades struck perfectly. After those two visreh fell, five more came behind them. Vehru took out his Rasplendur, and once they reached him, Vehru performed the unthinkable. Starting

with the left, with both hands on his Rasplendur, he cut the first one's neck, and on to the second one, until he hit the fifth one on his right; he did this with one cut in a straight line and with great speed. The visreh were more surprised that they had all been bested by one swing than from the fact that they were seconds from being dead.

"That was a good swing, my friend," yelled Luca, who stood a few feet behind him. And noticing more visreh heading towards them, he cried, "Look out!"

Vehru turned around and took them on one by one as Luca retreated a few steps until he accidentally bumped into the large dining table at the rear of the hall. Instantly, Luca saw that a number of visreh had spotted him, and they broke off from the main pack, making their way towards the exile.

With nothing to defend himself with, he quickly needed to find something to use as a weapon. He turned to the table and tried to break off a piece of it using his elbow, but alas, could not. He glanced back at the visreh and saw that they were almost on him. His blades were made out of wood, and thus flimsy. The strange sword he carried with him was crusted in dirt and not able to cut, thus useless. What could he do? Take them on using his bare hands? Not so, for he heard a cut of the wind to his left, ending with a large thump next to him.

Siel's golden Prossesur landed on the table. At first, Luca felt ashamed that he had forced the Alta to unsheathe one of his blades, but soon after, Siel gave him an approving smile, speaking to him as a gesture of mercy.

Luca took the Prossesur in his hand, and it felt like pure power, amplifying his confidence. Without giving it more thought, he became transfigured into an unnatural warrior. Blinded by the guidance of the blade, his thoughts yielded to the present moment, and he let his learning and his mysterious abilities take the helm of his soul.

Six visreh eventually reached Luca. They lunged at him one right after the other, as if they were attacking in a single file line. And Luca raised the golden Prossesur in the air, and without using his legs or torso, he stood like a statue, with only his arms flailing in all directions. Luca was finished with his cuts before the visreh had the chance to fall to the ground. The experience of his attack left Luca breathless, and it was enough time for a visreh to crawl up behind him, sneaking his way in for a kill. Unfortunately, Luca had no sense of this foul beast.

There was one who *did* feel Luca in danger, and on the second level, she fought her way through the visreh as she progressed down the hall, intent on reaching the fallen exile. It seemed

as if every other second a visreh would leap in front of her, but this did not intimidate the older Flower of Heatheranla. As a matter of fact, she was so fierce, that she took on the visreh with her smallest blade, her Enebran.

One visreh leaped in front of her, and she moved around the creature in order to use the creature's own movement against it. Succeeding, she threw it down to the lower level without much effort. A second one came upon her, and she quickly crouched to cut both of its knees with one movement. The visreh fell to the ground, and before the visreh had even hit the floor, Lereh had already leapt, and came down hard on the visreh with her knees bent and legs in the air. Before the visreh's head could crash onto the floor, her blade made forceful contact with its mass, and Lereh gave it that extra push to end the life of the vile creature as it hit the floor.

Reaching Luca, she saw the visreh behind him coming in for the kill. With a leap of courage, Lereh dove onto the massive dining table down below. The sound of her landing broke Luca out of his spell, and he turned to her and saw that she had landed on top of a visreh that had been about to take his life. She had it pinned down with her foot.

"I have a present for you," Lereh said. "Would you do the honors? Oh, and make sure not to hit my foot."

Luca slashed at the creature's neck with such precision that Lereh was truly impressed—and the fact that he kept his eyes on Lereh the whole time was even more impressive. "Thanks for that," Luca said. "But I don't need you here. Maybe Prince Nefiru might require your assistance."

"I didn't ask for your permission," rebutted Lereh. "Nefiru can handle himself. It's you I'm worried about." That comment did not help Luca's irritability. "I think I'll stay here just in case any more of them come up behind you," Lereh said, situating herself next to Luca. "We wouldn't want you to lose your other leg." Lereh smiled. Luca didn't.

A number of feet away from Luca and Lereh was Vohro, standing next to Siel, making sure no harm came to him. If there was anyone in the hall able to dispense the visreh using the least amount of effort, it would be Vohro, and it showed, for in his hand was one of the twins, his Nunsurrum. And every time a visreh or a group of them came near the Alta, he would send them to their miserable deaths like he was swatting at flies, becoming increasingly tired of their nuisance.

Siel sat next to him, and though his face showed a spirit fortified with a transcending power,

inside of him, both spiritually and physically, the whole of his structure was caving in. The more the visreh lay siege to the school, the more harm came to Siel. And the wounds he felt inside were louder than the screams of the dying creatures. But he maintained his composure; the last thing he wanted was for his students to see his fragile state. And as he sat with his eyes on the battle, out of the blue, a noticeable amount of blood trickled down his nose. Quickly, Siel caught the stream with his finger and did his best to hide his pain.

Once he cleared away the blood, he felt another uncomfortable being; it was something beyond imagining. Siel could feel things taking a horrid turn. He felt this unnatural presence linger about him, and the presence shifted towards Luca. Siel turned to Luca and saw that the exile was making his way towards one of the big windows that looked out towards the burning palace. Siel knew Luca had terrible thoughts about his father, and he also knew that a horrible unseen presence was also aware of Luca's troubles.

Luca walked up to the large window and stared into the vast openness of the land. The dirt storm and clouds were all-consuming, and he saw trees fighting for their very lives as they stood firm against the overpowering whirlpool of dirt that had accosted Loshendu Forest. The only thing he could see of the palace were the flames that penetrated the thick, dirt-laced fog. Luca began to wonder about his father.

And it came, a voice lingering in his head. *Luca, beastly boy, why aren't you at your father's side?* Another voice rang in his ear. *Failure to protect your father is something else you can add to your list of inadequacies! Luca, don't you fear your father has been consumed by flames?* Lastly, many voices in unison spoke to him. *We are sovereign! Let your father burn! Come to us; we will be your new father.*

"No!" yelled Luca out into the open air. "Get away from me, filth!" He bent down on one knee and covered his ears.

A Prince's Gate

HORROR WAS NOW THE MASTER OF THE PALACE. The people ran in and out of the burning flames and into the ravaging clouds of dirt; they ran from what was most terrifying to them, creatures made of a featureless shadow. The visreh had infiltrated and infected the whole of the palace, and people were seen jumping from palace windows and from the roof of the structure.

Waves of visreh crashed through the many halls and rooms, and in numbers they would jump on the guards and palace staff, munching on them like they were feasting on pristine meat, straight off the bone. People were wailing and spitting up appalling sounds. Destruction came through deafening blows to the palace by what seemed to be huge balls of decayed earth crashing into the palace and tumbling down the walls. These makeshift bombs appeared out of thin air, as if they had been birthed from a supernatural force. This bombardment was followed by tornadoes of dirt flying inside the many levels of the palace. These storms walked the halls, killing everything in sight and drowning the people of the land with their black, rotting earth. If the people of the palace had not been stripped of their flesh by the visreh, then they were filled with mud and soil, with dirt spilling out of their overstuffed mouths and ears.

Outside of his room, Druuk heard the screaming of the souls within the palace. He tried to sit up but barely managed to do so. Elba quickly came upon the prince to assist him.

“Elba, you must leave and be with Luca,” Druuk said while trying to stay seated.

“I’m not going to leave you alone, my prince,” Elba said. “Luca is protected in the school.”

“Yes, but you have a protection that most people do not,” Druuk said. “You know this.”

“Luca has his own special protection,” Elba said. “He doesn’t need mine.”

“Depart from me, Elba,” Druuk said. “I’m of no use to anyone anymore. Leave here. You must go and be by Luca’s side, for you’ll go with him on his exile as I requested.”

“Luca has plenty of people who would go with him and be his protector,” Elba said, taking a cold, damp cloth and patting the prince’s head. “I’ll stay here by your side.”

“Elba, do as you prince commands you,” Druuk said. “We’ll talk of this no more.” He took her hand in his. “This will not be the last you will see of me. We both know this. Make sure Luca understands.”

“I will, sire,” Elba said reluctantly, and she bent over and took Druuk’s head in her arms and kissed his forehead. “Goodbye, my prince.” With that, Elba rushed to the door and lost herself in the madness of the palace.

Moments passed as Druuk sat waiting in his bed for the dirt of the land to come and consume him. Fortifying his spirit and inner peace, he had finally managed to drown out the horrid screams coming from every nook and cranny of the palace, but he was still somewhat restless. So he reached for his night desk with great effort, and out of a drawer, he took out a pen and a small scroll. He laid back and began to write one last song of life. This certainly put a smile on his face.

And then a knock came at the door.

“Elba?” Druuk said.

The door opened and in came a young boy.

“Luca?” Druuk said.

“No, father,” the beastly boy said.

“You again,” Druuk said as he quickly penned something down and set the scroll in a small, metal box he had with him.

“Yes, me,” the boy said with pity.

“So you’ve finally come for me, Logrec,” Druuk said.

“Of course,” the beastly child said with the blood-red armor. “You always knew I would come.”

And the door closed behind him.

Elba ran down one of the many passageways on her way out of the palace, running into debris that had toppled inside the halls, blocking various exits. Elba had to double back a number

of times, though she did not run into many visreh, for they somehow wished to stay away from her whenever they felt her presence looming near them. The creatures would see her in the distance and would just smell her in the air as if she was made of a different substance than most of mankind, though she was just the same as everyone else, but not to the visreh; the instance they saw her, they would turn and flee with great fear.

Elsewhere in the palace, the king ran down one of the passageways with a slew of guards surrounding him. He had already tried to escape through several secret doors but had been unsuccessful in doing so, for the visreh had come and blocked his escape. Everywhere they turned to was infected by the vile creatures.

At last, they came to a corner and saw an opening to another passageway leading outside, but before they could advance, they were ambushed, not by the creatures, but by Drunen, who also had with him a small number of guards. At first they were so disoriented that they were prepared to fight each other, but once the prince realized it was his father, he ordered everyone to stand down.

“Where is Mother?” Drunen said.

“I’m afraid the Queen has fallen,” said King Dren. “Your mother, son, was consumed by these creatures. They attacked us during our sleep. A number of them fell on your mother, and I tried my best to get them off her, but some more came upon us and dragged me away. And they began to tear me apart until the guards came in and took care of them.” The king showed Drunen his wounds on his right arm and torso. “It was too late for your mother. After we got rid of all the ones that attacked her, she had already passed from this world.”

Drunen could not speak. He loved his mother very much, and a rage began to seep into his veins.

“Is your rage going to bring your beloved mother back?” said a voice in the shadows.

“What?” Drunen said as he looked around. “Who said that?!”

“I do apologize if my pets have been...hungry...of late,” Malasorta sneered, revealing herself to Drunen and the king.

“You!” Drunen said, raising his sword to her. “You did this! You brought these creatures into the palace. You’re responsible for all of this.”

“Yes, I *am* responsible for this,” Malasorta said, “and I will be responsible for so much more, including the death of your precious sun. I meant it when I said I would not leave without turning

this land into a sunless land. Did you think me a liar?"

"Malasorta, you will die by my hands," Drunen said, now in a much focused state.

"Lady of the Sunless Land," the king said. "Your actions have brought ruin to my kingdom, and for that you will not leave my sight with breath still in you."

"Be careful of what you wish for," Malasorta said. And to comply with his request, she ceased to breathe. Drunen took a couple of steps back.

"Look, king!" cried Malasorta. "Not one breath, yet, I'm still here." She began to cackle, as if the wildest bear had inherited the faculty of laughing. Her hair grew long, and her face turned black as death. Her arms elongated to twice their size, and her hands grew like those of a giant's. She grew in height to well over eight feet tall, and her legs became ten times as muscular as those of a man.

"Malasorta," the king said, horrified. "What have you become?!"

"The name is Mahlevenieh, old man," the beast said. "Learn the name of the one who will send you into a sunless abyss."

Seeing this horrible picture of a woman, Drunen lunged at the beast without hesitation. Mahlevenieh grabbed him by his sword's blade, lifting him and laughing in his face. She threw him against the wall so hard that it knocked him unconscious.

"Son!" the king shouted as he rushed to his firstborn's side, but before the king could shed any tears for Drunen, the beast came up behind him and grabbed his neck. She pulled him up to her, and she took one of her abnormal hands and thrust it into his chest, killing him instantly.

At the same time, a group of visreh had come upon them, and they sneaked up behind the lady beast. She threw the king on the floor. "Here, feed on royal blood," the beast said. Mahlevenieh took the king's crown off his body. "There are no kings in my land. *Everyone* is a sovereign!"

"Is that present for me?" the beastly child said, making his presence known in the midst of the shadows. Armored up in his blood-red metallic plates, he approached Mahlevenieh.

"Logrec, my nephew," Mahlevenieh said, "how good of you to come. I *do* have a gift for you."

Logrec took hold of the king's crown. "Thank you, my lady. I will add it to my collection. Now, for the *other* prince..."

As the beastly boy made his approach towards Drunen, his helmet twitched, and the picture

plate that covered his mouth moved, and a different picture moved in its place, that of a *salivating mouth*.

“My appetite grows for royal blood,” Logrec said as he bent over the prince. “You’re next, and then, of course, your precious *Luca*.”

“Your appetite is the true beast of the land,” said a voice coming from a distance.

Logrec and Mahlevenieh looked up and around the corridor in an attempt to spot the origin of the voice. Then, out of the darkness, Elba came into view.

“What is it that you said, old woman?” Mahlevenieh said.

“It was not me that said it, *Queen of Vice*,” Elba said.

“SHUT YOUR MOUTH!” Mahlevenieh shouted, clearly insulted by her words. “Don’t ever blaspheme in front of me again!”

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot,” Elba said, approaching them. “You’re not the *true* queen.”

“I’ll tear you apart!” Mahlevenieh roared, with the veins in her neck bulging like fattened snakes, and the beastly lady made a sudden move, as if she was beginning to lunge at the old woman, but quickly stopped dead on her tracks.

“Were you about to try something, imperfect beast?” Elba said, trying to work on the dark lady’s nerves. Mahlevenieh growled like a wild animal caught in a trap. “What do you see?”

Mahlevenieh’s eyes honed in on an object in the shadows. Logrec stood up and slowly backed away, ending up near Mahlevenieh.

“That can’t be,” Logrec said to the beast.

“What do you want, old woman?” Mahlevenieh said, backing away.

“Where is the boy’s mother?” Elba said.

Mahlevenieh smiled and scoffed. “What do you want with her?”

“The boy is to seek her out,” Elba said.

Mahlevenieh’s eyes grew immensely, and she pronounced her next words with pure passion. “*GOOD LUCK*.”

“Where is she, beast?!” Elba shouted, now approaching her. Mahlevenieh just snickered under her breath.

“ANSWER HER!” sprung out of the unseen, open air. Seconds later, a large hound, the same one that had saved Luca from the dastardly Nonio, revealed itself to the beast. This caused Mahlevenieh to cower and back up. “Near the end of the land,” said a hesitant Mahlevenieh.

“That’s where she takes refuge.”

And just as those words leapt out of the beast’s tongue, Logrec managed to pick up a lantern that had been up in flames for a while, and he took a visreh and busted the lantern on top of its head, igniting it in flames. Next, he picked up the visreh with superhuman strength and threw it at Elba, which forced her to dive backwards and onto the floor. At the same time, the beast called upon a great dust storm to head over and ambush Elba and the hound. This gave Logrec just enough time to bust through the wall and jump out of the palace. Mahlevenieh followed, with both of them landing on the ground next to an immense pile of burning ashes.

Logrec spat at the earth, “I’m done with this palace.”

“Quickly, nephew,” Mahlevenieh said, “to the school.”

The Burying of the Land

-part two-

“*REMEMBER!*” shouted Mastro Jeskun. “No blades left clean!”

And as soon as he gave out his battle cry, another mass of visreh burst into the hall. Massive amounts of dirt and rocks accompanied them as the creatures broke off into every direction possible. This time, after the horde of visreh had come in, one of Mahlevenieh’s guards soon followed; he was one of the three that Vohro had confronted the night Luca was born, the white-haired man. With his sword drawn, he led the charge of the corrupt creatures against the Davinians.

“Kill them all!” the white-haired guard said. “Cover them up with dirt! Eat them alive! Bring the shadow upon them!” Mastros Gehwen and Jeskun took notice of this man and began making their way towards him.

This second wave of visreh was more massive in size than the first that had invaded the hall. The Davinians were outnumbered more than ten to one, and it was too much for some of them to handle. It is true that the Davinian is capable of fighting a number of men at once, but these weren’t men; they were creatures of shadow driven by a relentless hate for the virtuous.

One after the other, a great number of the lesser Davinians fell to the visrehs’ insatiable hunger. As soon as this happened, other Davinians began to lose confidence, and terror struck throughout their nerves. Then, many started to lose their way and focus, and the easier it was for the overwhelming horde of visreh to overpower them.

The Davinians were beginning to lose the battle. But the older Davinians, witnessing the destruction of their lesser and younger compatriots, were stricken with anger, and it was an anger

that did not lead to vengeance, for that type of anger would surely bring about their doom. It was much more of an anger brought about from a diminishing sense of true justice.

All at once, the higher blades took it upon themselves to even out the score, and instead of fighting two or three visreh at any given moment, they settled for eight to ten, and without hesitation, they let their arms swing with all of their blades. And there was a frenzy of hacked limbs coming from every corner of the hall as the Davinians fought with gallantry and efficacy.

Siel sat with Vohro at his side, and he knew it was time to unleash his former pupil, who had kept his cool for so long that he was on the brink of exploding with violence. Siel gestured to Vohro to let loose his blades, and the deaf warrior fulfilled his master's wishes.

Calmly, Vohro approached the first mass of visreh, who numbered about fifty, and he got their attention by taking one of the dead visreh's head and igniting it with a torch and then throwing it towards the group of creatures. They turned to him, hungering for Davinian flesh, rushing him as one solid group.

Vohro unsheathed his Rasplendur and opened up his eyes wide in order to see everything that encompassed him. *The right side of the mass seems to be advancing faster than the rest. I should start with them.*

As the first ten or twenty reached him, he administered a swift authority upon the visreh, and he slashed them one by one before they could even lunge and attack him. Yet, he did not kill them, only cut them furiously while pushing the creatures to his rear. *If I move to the middle, I can see better the other half that comes towards me. If I attack the second half, I can keep the first half at bay with the dismemberment of their brothers!*

Vohro took out his Prossesur with his left hand, and with great speed, he took on the second half of visreh by using both blades in a quick side-to-side motion, beheading every single visreh that came towards him. He did this without pause or mistake, and the heads of the fallen creatures started to forcefully fly out behind him and hit the first half of visreh like a multitude of massive rocks being launched at the enemy. With so many heads coming at them, it was difficult for the first half of the creatures to double back and attack Vohro. He kept them at bay like he said he would, and after he finished with the second half of the creatures, he turned to the first half, who seemed fed up with being slapped in the face by a shower of dismembered heads. Vohro raised his blades to them. *Now, we shall end it.*

As fast as he took care of the first half, he ended the lives of the second. This was Vohro,

father of Vehru and guardian of the throne of Daví. After all the visreh were dead, he made his way back to the Alta and stood guard by his side.

Gehwen and Jeskun approached the front of the hall, where the white-haired leader of the pack stood calling out the orders to the visreh, but before reaching the guard, the mastros heard sounds of heavy steps coming towards the entrance to the hall. The Davinians began to fear the origins of these steps, for some suspected the worst, especially Luca, who stood near the rear of the hall with his eyes glued to the front doors. The lady beast had arrived.

Mahlevenieh ducked under the doors and made herself visible for all to see. Her bulging veins and dark hair amplified her veracity. “Creatures!” she yelled.

Every visreh in the hall stopped and turned to the domineering presence. Luca stared at the beast, who days earlier claimed to be his kin. Even the Davinians froze in attention.

“I can’t be family to that,” Luca whispered. “A beast like that can have no kin.”

Logrec, adorned in his glimmering armor, revealed himself from behind the beast. He carried his lance dressed in steel and ivory, and his armor glistened whenever a certain shadow or light would hit it at an angle.

“The boy!” Jeskun said as he became more cautious of these two new visitors. “He is the life of the creatures. Kill him and the creatures will die!”

“How do you know?” Gehwen said.

“It is true!” yelled Siel from his throne. “This I know for sure.”

Following Siel’s words, two Davinian students dashed out of the mass of warriors and ran straight at the boy with swords drawn and a brave battle cry.

“No, don’t be foolish!” Jeskun said as he tried to stop them.

Logrec took his lance and raised it up high, and with frightening speed, he launched it at the Davinians, mortally wounding the brave boys.

“Nephew, you always hit your mark,” Mahlevenieh said.

“It’s all in the throw, okay,” Logrec said with his mouth covered by that hideous display of slides, which as he said his words, switched from one slide to the next, ending on a picture of an elated smile, as if he had just won a prize.

“Creatures!” screamed Mahlevenieh once again. “No flesh tastes as sweet as the wisest of them all. Kill the master servant on the throne!”

With that war cry, the creatures turned their heads to Siel and set their bearings on him and

him alone. The duty of all Davinians now was to prevent the death of their Servantu Alta, and immediately all of them moved to the rear of the hall, forming one huge mass of warriors. If the foul creatures wanted to reach the Alta, they would have to get through them first. But this did not deter the creatures, for they rushed the Davinians regardless of how many blades awaited them. It was a bloody collision between man and creature, vice and virtue.

Jeskun turned to Gehwen. "Mastro, go with the pack," he said. "Keep your eyes on the beast-woman. Protect the lesser ones from her hands. I'll deal with the white-haired one."

Gehwen grasped arms with Jeskun and retreated into the mass of Davinians fighting for their lives. Mahlevenieh progressed down the hall, swatting and killing Davinians with one swoop of her arms. Bodies were thrown in all directions, crashing into stone and windows.

Logrec followed behind her with his blade drawn. He grabbed a visreh by the arm and pulled him close. "Go and retrieve my lance, creature." The visreh sped off as ordered.

Jeskun walked up to the white-haired guard at the front of the hall, who had already noticed that Jeskun had taken an interest in him and had prepared himself for battle. "You know, Davinian, that you can never kill me," the guard said as he ran his fingers down the length of his sword.

"If I knew that, would I have come upon you?" Jeskun said, with his Rasplendur drawn.

"Yes, you are of the sort to do so," the white-haired guard said.

"Yes, you're right," Jeskun said. "I'll give you this. I *am* of that sort. But, nevertheless, I will defeat you."

"Defeat is of no interest to me," the guard said. "You can defeat me, but you cannot kill me." And with that, the guard lunged at Jeskun.

Jeskun raised his Rasplendur to block the attack and did so without effort, but he also felt a strange power stemming from the man, something otherworldly. And the guard came at him again, striking Jeskun at all angles, and once more, Jeskun deflected the slashes with skill, and again he felt a certain power behind the attacks, as if he were being pounded on by someone four times the size of his opponent.

Regardless, he could not waste thoughts on trivialities as these amid combat. He knew that at least he could deflect the blows, no matter how powerful they were. And if he could deflect the blows, he could counter them as well. So he waited.

The guard came at Jeskun with a downward slash, and the mastro met the blade with his own

at the top of the guard's swing, and Jeskun let the guard's blade bring both of the blades down to the floor. Jeskun let his Rasplendur slide up the guard's blade to the hilt, and with some force, Jeskun bumped the guard's hilt up, leaving him with enough room to take a small swing back and slash up with his blade, allowing him to make contact with the guard's hand.

And with only a second of a warning, the guard's hand, which held the blade, was cut off and thrown into the air, blade and all. The white-haired menace fell to his knees, and Jeskun quickly followed his cut with another cross that made contact with the guard's neck, beheading the guard with ease.

The man's head flew into the air but quickly was caught—by the man's left hand! The guard placed the dismembered head back on his body like he was screwing it back on, and he gave Jeskun the most horrific of smiles. This prompted the mastro to thrust his Rasplendur into the man's chest, and with all his strength, Jeskun used his blade to lift the guard in the air.

“Be gone, you filth!” screamed Jeskun as he held the unnatural thing up in the air with his Rasplendur.

In response to Jeskun, the man took his hand, and grabbing his own head by the hair, detached it from his body once more. With his head in his hand, he took it and placed his head right in front of Jeskun's terrified soul, only inches away. “I am sovereign!” the man said. “You cannot defeat US!”

Disgusted, Jeskun took his Rasplendur out of the man's body, and in that same motion, he cut the man's head in two, and followed by cutting both of his arms and legs, ending with a fierce cut to the torso, which split the body in half. The dismembered body fell to the floor, and once it fell, Jeskun saw what seemed to be a shadowed mass leaving the body with sounds of laughter and annoyance. It came and went like a sudden breath. Jeskun was beside himself and fell to the floor, exhausted.

In the meantime, Siel sat on his throne, pondering what had just happened to the white-haired guard. Something deep inside Siel spoke to him, and he recognized a power unimaginable in their enemy. Siel was to keep this unseen force as far as possible from his students. Perhaps they could not win this battle.

“Vohro, prepare yourself to confront the beast-woman,” Siel said. “You, Jeskun and Gehwen must deal with her now. Do this, master of blades.” Vohro's eyes lit up, and the mastro prepared for the fight of his life.

Outside the school, another battle raged. From the shadows outlining the edges of the bridge, Elba stepped out on a horse. She had escaped the destruction of the palace and was en route to finding Luca, but she was overwhelmed by the sight of the school under siege. Her mission now became more urgent than ever; she needed to find a way inside the school so she could grab Luca and take him to safety. This was his father's last wish.

But when Elba came upon the great doors of the school, all she could see was turmoil in a cloud of dirt and fire. She saw the multitude of visreh running around with frenzied dispositions, looking for something to sink their teeth into. The creatures had scaled the whole of the school, wreaking havoc against its foundation. Walls were coming down in large sections, and windows were being blown out into the night air. Statues were being desecrated, and the multitude of gems were being picked off and thrown into the vastness of the sky.

Some of the creatures spotted the elder woman atop her horse in the distance, and without worry they went after her with claws out and eyes full of appetite, but when they got to a certain distance from her, they all screeched to a halt, and their eyes closed and squinted, as if taking in some grand light; they were terrified beyond all senses. Fearful, they turned around, retreating back to the school.

Elba approached the chaos near the great doors with caution, for there was an important battle occurring in front of her eyes. The Gohrgos of the golden doors had been fighting for a while now, and judging by the carnage that was left on the floor, they had defeated close to a hundred visreh.

Now, the Gohrgos were in a battle for their lives with the other two guards that were kin to the white-haired man who had been recently defeated by Jeskun. The black-haired and red-haired men crossed swords with the guardians of the school, and they were putting up an unbelievable fight.

Elba heard a howl amongst the wind, and it was something vicious. She saw a dark rider sporting a horse-haired mane coming on a horse. In his hand, he held a curved Rasplendur, and he twirled it in the air as if he were commanding the visreh to destroy the school. Mirel had survived the cut to his mouth, which had healed horrendously, similar to the previous scar adorning his lips.

The two guards capitalized on the weakness of the Gohrgos, who had drained most of their

energy during their battle with the hundred visreh. But the Gohrgos were so mighty that even in their weakened state, they succeeded in landing heavy blows against their enemy. Little did the Gohrgos know that their two challengers were being animated by pure shadow, for if they knew this, they would have probably abandoned their fight, but it was a good thing that they were ignorant of this fact, for though their stamina was depleting, their courage was increasing every second they landed a blow on their two opponents.

And as an act of infinite valor, the two Gohrgos searched deep inside themselves in order to seek out every ounce of energy they could muster up, and they harvested all the energy they found into one great blow against their enemies. They both swung their lances at the two guards, making contact with their bodies, slashing them in two and launching them into the sky. The two guards' demise lay in the underestimation of the Gohrgos' hatred for evil, and the school's guardians saw visions of black shadow seep out of the slain bodies laying on the floor, jetting above and merging with the reigning darkness. And the Gohrgos stood in shock of the evil they had just witnessed.

But the increased effort on their part left the Gohrgos depleted of energy, and as soon as they were aware of their enemies' demise, they too fell to their knees. Elba worried; she knew that there was still one enemy lingering about. Mirel, first taken aback by the defeat of the guards, rode up to the Gohrgos to take advantage of their hampered state. He dismounted his horse and strutted up to the two fallen warriors. "I was hoping for some good battle," said Mirel, "but I guess I will just have to be satisfied with the knowledge that I was the one who ended you two ancient relics."

Reacting with contempt, one of the Gohrgos reached out his arm and tripped Mirel on his back as one last *hoorah* against the despicable Davinian.

Once Mirel managed to get up, he kicked the Gohrgo in the face as a retaliatory gesture.

"Arrogant fool," the Gohrgos in unison said.

"Stop with your chanting and let us end this," said Mirel, raising his Rasplendur.

"Excuse me," Elba said, coming out of the shadows and making herself known to Mirel. "I hope you weren't really going to strike down those valiant warriors, were you?"

Clueless, Mirel stepped back and just marveled at the old woman. He was flabbergasted by the woman's *gravitas*. "You have no wisdom for your age, woman. Who are you, old maid?"

"Like you say, I'm just an old woman," Elba said, "an old woman—with a friend."

“What friend?” said Mirel, stepping up to her.

“ME!” said a voice, like thunder breaking against the wind.

Mirel turned to see where the voice came from but could find nothing, and before he could let out another sound, a presence appeared in front of him. It towered over Mirel with intimidation, and it was lean and strong, covered in a formidable armor from head to toe. Its eyes shone like the sun, and it reached its arm out and took Mirel by the neck.

“I am *Umbrador!*” the guardian-star said.

Before Mirel could let out any indication of a sound or whimper, the Umbrador grabbed him with the other hand, and, with Mirel now in his embrace, jumped up in the air so far up, that they both disappeared from sight. A few seconds passed, when out of the open sky, the Umbrador came back down, landing on the ground with force.

The star-being walked up to Elba. “He is now hundreds of miles from here,” the Umbrador said with a low and godly voice. “He will pester you no more for the time being.”

Elba was both terrified and calm, for she did not know how to react to the being in front of her, but knew that she was in the presence of something benevolent. “Wait, you are not *my* guardian. You are the one Luca spoke of. You are his guardian star, the Umbrador with the mighty armor.”

“I guard Luca and those who love him—and I am more than just star,” the illuminated form said. “Go and help these beings in front of me. *I* will take the boy.”

And the tall Umbrador disappeared into the open space as if he had split the air in two and stepped into another world. Elba was left to tend to the Gohrgos.

The Cut of the Rasplendur

THE VISREH HAD BEGUN TO OVERWHELM THE SCHOOL, AND Siel commenced with making plans for an escape. The lesser Davinians would be escorted out the secret passageway leading outside while the higher blades would take the blunt of the combat at the front of the line. Once all the lower blades had left the school, Siel and the officials would concentrate on Mahlevenieh, who was wreaking havoc at the front of the hall by swaying her beastly arms back and forth, launching Davinians in every direction possible.

Near the rear of the hall, Vehru kept slashing away at all the visreh attacking him and Luca.

“Vehru!” Luca cried in the middle of his swings. “Friend! You can leave my side. I’ll be fine. Go to the front and help the lower blades!”

“Are you sure?” Vehru said as he twirled and beheaded one of the creatures in front of Luca.

“Go!” he screamed. “I seem to be doing fine by myself with Siel’s Prossesur.” And it was true. No one there was slashing visreh as efficient as the fallen Davinian. Luca had tapped into some inner supernatural strength, and there were moments where his speed was something otherworldly.

Vehru zigzagged through the mass of Davinians on his way to the front lines, stopping in the middle of them to look for his affection. He spotted Luleh at the front line next to a group of second blades, for she was lending these lesser students her fighting prowess. Jubilant, Vehru made his way to Luleh, popping up behind her just in time to use his blade to strike down a visreh who had been trying to get at Luleh’s blind side. “Together?” Vehru asked, hoping to join the Flower in defending the younger students.

With a smile, she complied with his request. “Together.” So they began taking on twice as

many foes and ending them twice as fast.

Jené and Nefiru had not moved from the wooden table they had set up, striking down any unfortunate creature mustering up enough courage to jump on the table, challenging them. As the mass of Davinian warriors began to move closer to the rear of the hall per Siel's command, the two young servantus decided to stay atop their table and take on the visreh regardless of the fact that they were now left alone and exposed.

But when Mahlevenieh finally broken through a wall of higher blades near the front of the hall and made her way towards the center, all who saw the boys standing on top of the table began screaming at them, warning Jené and Nefiru of their blatant stupidity.

“Get off the table!” one Davinian screamed.

“She's coming your way!” said another Davinian. “Fools! Off the table now and join us!”

But the boys were defiant and threw their hands up in the air as they held their bloodied Rasplendurs.

“Why should we move?!” Nefiru said.

“This is *our* home!” Jené said.

And they banged Rasplendurs together, which sent a shrilling sound wave throughout the hall.

“Let her come!” the two boys said together as a team.

And just when Mahlevenieh was close to reaching them, Jeskun and Gehwen sneaked up behind the boys, and with them still on the table, moved it all the way back to the rear and into the mass of Davinians.

“Hey, come on!” Nefiru said.

“You guys can't take her on by yourselves!” Jené said, clearly disappointed.

“Now stay!” Jeskun said as he turned around and made his way towards the beast-lady.

At the rear of the hall, Luca had managed to defeat all of the visreh within ten yards of his space. After he took in a few breaths to reinvigorate himself, Lereh walked up to him. “Why aren't you fighting?” Lereh said.

“I just finished,” Luca said. “Don't you see this?” he pointed to the dead bodies on the floor.

“I'm supposed to believe you did all of this?” Lereh said.

Luca noticed that she had been cut near her left shoulder and was bleeding quite a bit. “Are you all right?”

“It stings.”

“We need to bandage that up.”

“I can’t fix it now, so let’s not waste any time.”

“Here,” Luca said, tearing off part of his cloak and wrapping it around Lereh’s arm to seal the wound. As he spun the bandage, a visreh came upon them, and Lereh jerked her good arm so she could send it to its death with a single swing.

“Stay still!” Luca remarked.

“Are we done?” Lereh said.

“Done,” Luca said as he finished tying up the bandage.

“Well, thanks for that,” Lereh said reluctantly. “Now, go make yourself useful, Luca.”

But before Luca had a chance to reply to the girl who had all of a sudden become more important to him than she’d been a few minutes ago, a sharp pain shot forth from his shoulder. The strike had come and gone before the pain began to set in. Luca looked to his right shoulder and saw blood seeping out from his cloak. He turned to his rear and saw the cause of it: an awe-inspiring lance was impaled on the floor behind him. All of this happened so quickly that it sort of put him in a state of shock.

Logrec had missed his mark, and on his face, the plates inside his helmet flipped, landing on a plate of a mouth in pure contempt. Without further thought, he went after Luca, scaling the walls and avoiding the mass of Davinians in the middle. But he did not go unnoticed. A number of Davinians witnessed this act of cowardice, and knowing that Logrec was the key to stopping all the visrehs, many Davinians set their sights on the beastly boy. But this was harder than it seemed, for Logrec carried with him a loyal following of creatures, and whenever one of the Davinians came close to him, out of the blue, that Davinian was bombarded by ten to twenty visreh.

Alas, Logrec reached the rear of the hall and jumped down. Siel watched from his throne as the boy came to Luca, but he did not help. Some things Luca had to confront on his own, for what good would it do to not have conflict in one’s life? For hardship and conflict build character, allowing us to decide between good and evil, even if it led to death, which was known to be less of a punishment than the evils that led to it. And there were some things Siel could not interfere in; it was not his place. So he did not come between Luca and his fate. Intervening in these types of matters sometimes belonged to forces outside of one’s self and one’s own world.

“It’s time, Luca!” Logrec said. “You come with us, okay; you meant for us.”

“He’ll go nowhere with you,” Lereh said, taking up arms against Logrec.

“Charming,” Logrec said. “Even in the halls of battle, childish affection exists. This is why I came to take you, Luca—take you from all this *outwardness*.”

“You’ll have to pass through me to do that,” Lereh said with great valor.

“Luca, please put your pet away.”

“Watch your tongue, beastly child,” Luca said.

Logrec’s mouthpiece moved like a carousel of paintings, ending up on one slide that had a drawing of a mouth saying *ooh*. He completed the gesture by putting his hand up to his mouth.

“Come now, cripple,” Logrec said. “Don’t keep us waiting.”

“If all you wanted was me, why did you come to take the land as well?”

“That is a foolish question. You’re only a small part in a grand scheme. You’re necessary to survival. *You* are how we bring the darkness to the land!”

“How so?”

“You have something in you that we cannot destroy but must cover up. You have been given something.”

“So you want my sword, is that it?”

“No! No the sword but what came with it! We need *all* of you. We’ll take you to our land, to the land of darkness. Then you’ll finally be covered. We’ll cover that light that’s inside of you!”

“But why bring the darkness?”

“To *kill the sun!*” the beastly child said, “to bury the land in dirt and cover it with the thickest of fogs. If we cannot lure men to darkness, then we bring darkness to men. You cannot escape it, Luca. Come with us; we need you. We need to stifle you, make everything shadow, then man no longer need shadow, for they walk in darkness and shadow becomes man!”

“Enough!” Lereh could stand no more of it, and she lunged towards Logrec, yet the boy in red need not do anything but raise his arms straight out in an embracing manner, as if he was saying “*Come and strike me.*”

And she did; her Rasplendur struck precisely at his heart, but the sword did little damage to his armor.

“Tsk, tsk, how rude,” hissed Logrec at his opponent. He countered by striking Lereh on her cheek, but the blow was so fierce, that it sent her flying through the air and onto a mass of

Davinians near them. After disposing of Lereh, Logrec leaped towards Luca, tackling him to the ground. “Fallen prince, do you have anything to say before I take you?” Logrec said as he put pressure on Luca’s neck.

“Sta—” Luca could barely say, then he broke into a whisper, mumbling some phrase. Somehow, Luca could not tap into that superhuman strength he had done so earlier. It seemed as if Logrec neutralized it in some way—or *maybe* Logrec was just as powerful as he was.

“You want what?” Logrec replied. “You were actually going to say something?”

“My *star*.”

“Star?” Logrec said. “What *star*, Luca?”

“*This* star!” screamed a voice coming from all directions. The hall instantaneously grew bright with the whitest light, and everyone near Luca’s vicinity were immediately blinded and forced them to cover their eyes with their hands.

And before Logrec could decipher the voice, he was suddenly lifted up and pulled away from Luca by a mysterious force; the boy in red was launched into the air, crashing through one of the big windows at the back of the hall.

Luca was also taken; he was lifted out of the hall as if some great giant made of light came in and pulled him out of the school in order to keep him safe.

A moment passed, and where there were two boys before, there stood none. All were astounded and amazed.

Before any of the students and masters had a chance to process what had just happened to Luca, the battle continued, for the Davinians were still in the thick of it, and there was no time to spend on pondering unnatural things. Mahlevenieh had progressed to the rear of the hall, and the only thing that stood between her and the mass of Davinians were three brave mastros. She had already managed to create a trail of death with the bodies of lesser Davinians.

These three Davinians, Gehwen, the master of ceremonies and of the lesser blades; Jeskun, the master of short blades; and Vohro, the high master of blades and number three in the Davinian hierarchy, were now the school’s last line of defense against this sunless beast. They waited for her to make the first move, all three with their Rasplendurs drawn and at the ready.

Lady Mahlevenieh stood before them, towering over the three with her face blacker than night, with her legs more powerful than any beast known to them, and her hands that could instantaneously crush a man’s head without warning. She waited for them to make the first

move.

Because all three mastros had differing martial styles, they had to approach her individually lest they get caught up in their own confusion and tactics. Gehwen was first. He stepped in near her legs, confusing Malehvenieh, and while she clumsily blinked, he circled around her and threw both his *Trunu* and *Enebran* to the back of her knees, which forced her to squat down and prop herself up with her arm.

Next, Gehwen gallantly jumped over her, and when he touched ground, he spun to meet her face-to-face. He raised his *Rasplendur* with all his might and brought it down in a slash that could have split the land in two, but it did not, for it was blocked by Mahlevenieh's other arm. The strong Davinian blade pounced on her flesh, making only a slight cut then sliding off her overly muscular arm. All three of the mastros were astonished, and now they feared what they did not fear before.

Quickly, Mahlevenieh stood up, and with her right arm grabbed Gehwen by the neck, throwing him across the hall while simultaneously taking out both the blades that were stuck in the back of her knees. As Gehwen glided over the crowd of warriors, she flung both blades at him, making them stick on the left side of his chest, mortally wounding him. He dropped on the mass of Davinians, a fallen master.

Anger swam through Jeskun's limbs. His mind had turned into a frenzy of emotions, and he harnessed that energy to make his move on the beast. Mahlevenieh had managed to knock Gehwen's *Rasplendur* out of his hand before flinging him across the room, and she bent over and grasped the Davinian blade.

"Hands off that pure blade!" cried Jeskun.

"Davinian rat, I'll beat you down with your precious Davinian *Rasplendur*," Mahlevenieh said.

She came towards him, slashing at his chest, but Jeskun managed to elude the attack and counter without effort, yet his *Rasplendur* was met by the one she grasped, and the two blades clashed, and a loud clang sounded off in the air. With their blades caught, she easily pushed Jeskun with a flick of her wrist, dropping him to the floor. Seconds later, Jeskun managed to pull himself up without giving Mahlevenieh a chance to attack. He raised his *Rasplendur* high to come in with a powerful lunge, and the beast just stood laughing at him.

"Now you will see what I am capable of," Mahlevenieh said.

Jeskun made his move, jumping in the air with both hands on his Rasplendur. And as he hovered in the air, Mahlevenieh pulled her arm back and forcefully brought it forward to meet his Rasplendur. The blades collided, but this time, Mahlevenieh's thrust was so powerful, that it cut through Jeskun's Rasplendur, effectively cutting it in half.

Before Jeskun had time to realize his demise, Mahlevenieh managed to land one of her powerful thighs into Jeskun's center mass, and the force sent him flying to the floor, knocked unconscious. After witnessing this, Siel ordered some of his Davinians to retrieve Jeskun and bring him to the rear of the hall.

Only Vohro was left. He did not move or get angry; he just held his Rasplendur in his hand and waited for his opponent to make a move, but he spoke to the beast, "You may have defeated my brothers in arms, but I want you to know that, though I may not defeat you, I *will* cut you. I will scar that ugly face of yours."

"*Do not call my UGLY!*" Mahlevenieh said, raising her hands to the air. "I am *BEAUTIFUL* beyond all imagining!"

"Then come at me, thing of beauty," Vohro said.

Fueled by anger, the lady came towards Vohro, grasping Gehwen's Rasplendur. Vohro waited patiently until the blade was so near that it could have trimmed the hairs on his face, and he stepped to the side, letting her Rasplendur strike the floor. It did so in such a forceful manner that the blade got stuck, and there was a lapse of a few seconds where, instinctively, Mahlevenieh pulled on the sword in order to dislodge it.

This was all the time Vohro needed, for though he knew that her body was immune to his Rasplendur, he also knew that Mahlevenieh's face, which was the symbol of her vanity, was not immune to that which was not vain, his humble blade. So, in a flash, like lightning does when it strikes the ground and is visible for only a blink of an eye, he raised his Rasplendur with grace and cut the left and right side of her blackened face, as he had said he would do.

In return, there came a wrath from the lady-beast, and Mahlevenieh's limbs sprung up and struck Vohro so hard that some of his clothing was torn from him, and his vest split in two, causing most of his blades to strike the floor. He was knocked down to the ground, defeated. Immediately, Vehru and Pabru burst out of the crowd, grabbing the beaten mastro and his blades and dragging him to the rear, where Siel sat in contemplation.

The Alta had just witnessed Mahlevenieh defeat his most powerful Davinians, yet he

continued to exude calmness. Vohro, who was being helped by his son to move about, came up to Siel. "She is a beast of unimaginable strength," Vohro said. "We must get you out of here at once."

"Don't worry about me, my loyal servant," Siel said gently. "We must think of the students and of the people of the land." Siel stood up only to fall to the ground a second time, and now Vohro and a few others were aware that the Servantu Alta ailed inside. Siel spit up blood and quickly wiped it off with his palm. He managed to stand up and gain some balance.

"Alta!" Vohro said. "You're hurt! Where?" Vohro looked for a wound.

"You will not find anything outside of me," Siel said. "I ail along with the school. As the school is being torn down, so is my being."

"Then we must get you out of here quick!" Vehru said.

"I appreciate your concern, noble servantu," Siel said. "but you must tend to your father." Siel then put his hand on his beloved mastro's shoulder. "Vohro, you must lead the students out of the passageway and into the clearing outside. I'll follow you once everyone is gone."

"And what of the Lady?" Vohro said.

"I will have a few words with her," Siel said. And the soul behind his eyes was so formidable that Vohro did not even question his master's statement.

"Take care, Alta," Vohro said. He motioned for Vehru to lead him outside with the others.

One after the other, the Davinians retreated to the back of the hall and down a small passageway leading to the catacombs. Alas, all were gone except Siel. The hall had already been cleared of the visreh, but it appeared that more were coming from outside of the school, and some still lived throughout the other parts of the grand structure, yet the banquet hall was left empty, full of bodies and death. Only Malevehnieh and the High Servant remained.

The beast from the sunless land approached the white servant. Siel disrobed himself to reveal his snow-white vest and golden, diamond-laced blades.

"Oh, my," Mahlevenieh said. "What majesty." The beast stopped a couple of feet from the high servant. "All those diamonds and gold! Do you deem yourself worthy of all that beauty, high one?"

"No, I don't," he said without emotion. "Would you?"

"Oh, every waking minute," Mahlevenieh said.

"That is why you willed the sun to leave your land, Malasorta. You thought yourself to

possess more radiant rays.”

“You speak nonsense,” the beast said. “And my name is not Malasorta, old one. I am truly Mahlevenieh of the Sunless Land, from the depths of the abyss. As you can see, I am more than you. You cannot defeat me. Not in this world or in any other.” She breathed on Siel, staining him with her decay.

Siel stood idly in the midst of the lady’s putrid breath and did not speak. Mahlevenieh reached inside the depths of her long, deformed body, and with full force, let out a terrible *roar* that almost knocked Siel down; his hair and skin were pressed, as if hurricane winds molested his entire body.

“I will grant you some last words, white servant,” Mahlevenieh said.

“I’ll be brief,” Siel said as he detached his Rasplendur from his back and moved it to his hip. “You have revealed to me your name. Thank you. For now I know just who you are and *what* you are. You may be my superior, lesser star, but by your love of vice, you took upon flesh, and flesh is something my Rasplendur can always touch.”

“Just you try—”

And before Mahlevenieh could finish her remark, Siel twitched, as if he had moved his arm, and his hand slightly moved with grace, and it appeared as if his blade was unsheathed, but before it became apparent that Siel had drawn his blade, it was already put back in its place and laid to rest.

Right after the blade returned to its home, the cut was heard, and Siel’s strike was so full of might that the force of the swing ripped most of Siel’s clothes off his body and left his hair flowing in the aftermath. His face was covered in blood, and his eyes were like new moons. Before Mahlevenieh had realized what had happened, her body symmetrically split in two and casually fell to the floor.

“I warned you before to not ever again force my blade out of its place,” Siel said to the fallen beast. “It is considered selfish, vain one.” And the lady-beast was no longer in the presence of the white servant.

Regardless of the fact that the Davinians had managed to escape the hall, they still had to manage getting through the catacombs and to the passageway leading them away from the school, which was a long, narrow tunnel that stretched deep into the earth. On most days, this

passageway would be hollow and dark, but that night, life animated all the lengths of the winding tunnel, and hundreds of torches and lanterns lit up the space throughout the narrow path. The tunnel reached over two miles long, and the warriors made great progress, using all the energy they had left in order to pull through to the other side.

The higher Davinians were at the rear as they herded the lesser ones to the front. Luleh and Lereh carried Jeskun, and Vohro was being helped by his son. Pabru, Tamru and Nefiru brought up the rear of the pack. They all traveled with a single goal: to reach the safety of the forest and to join the Bunish people who waited for them at the end of the passageway. And after a long stretch of running and shuffling in silence, the first Davinian broke ground into the light of the setting sun.

The Setting of the Sun

THE DARK EARTH RUMBLED AND LOOSENED THE NEATLY-PACKED SOIL around an eight-foot diameter on the ground. The dirt began to break away in clumps, revealing something underneath, some type of wooden door, to be exact. And it shook and rattled, until after some strenuous work, it opened into the damp air occupying the slumbering moors. The first Davinian broke light and surfaced from the underground tunnel. He climbed himself up from the ground and into the glow of the setting sun.

“The path is clear,” the lesser Davinian said. “Let everyone come through and into the shadows of Loshendu Forest.” The Davinian turned to the west and saw the sun engrossed by a dark movement of clouds and dirt. “The sun is setting.”

“Quickly!” said another Davinian, spouting out of the living earth. “We must get everyone to safety.”

The Davinians had reached the edges of Loshendu Forest after traversing the two miles of winding tunnels leading out of the condemned school and into the hands of the living earth.

“Bring the people out first, then the warriors!” Lereh said, who had broken off from her sister in order to herd the guests out of the tunnel and into the cover of the tall trees.

In a single-file line, the Bunish people rushed out of the hole in the ground like ants spewing out of an awakened anthill. Under the silence of breaths, they marched on and into the forest, where they waited for further instructions.

“Keep them quiet,” Lereh instructed one of the lesser blades who was escorting the guests.

The Davinians that had survived the battle began to surface, until finally the last three,

Nefiru, Tamru and Pabru, came up for air.

“*That* certainly wasn’t fun,” Nefiru said.

“The crying of the children,” Tamru lamented. “I couldn’t take it anymore; I almost lost my wits.”

“What a way to ruin a good feast,” Pabru said, trying to insert some humor into the desperation of his friends. “You know, with the ambush and all.” It did not work.

“Pabru!” shouted a voice. He turned and saw his friend trying his best to keep his father on his feet. He ran over to offer Vehru some help.

As the Davinians strode up the grass-covered hills leading up to Loshendu Forest, it was apparent that in the distance, darkness was beginning to consume the diamond horizon.

“The sun?” Luleh said as she helped Jeskun up the hill. “Where is it going?”

The monstrous fog had completely covered the school and palace with a dense smoke, a gas made of dirt and heat. And now it seemed to them that the fog was doing the unthinkable, rising up towards the sky, seemingly making its way to the dying sun.

“The sun is setting—for good,” Jené said.

“The sun always sets,” Vehru said.

“The fog covers it,” Jené replied. “The sun is setting in the midst of the bastard fog. No longer will our skies be clear. No longer will the sun set and rise in the open sky. The sun is setting for good, young servantu. Once the fog spreads throughout the night, we won’t see the sun rise again; it sets before our eyes. The light diminishes into the west.”

“That can’t be!” Lereh said. “The fog can’t stay there forever.”

“The same thing happened to the sunless land,” whispered Pabru. “Is our land now a sunless land?”

“Nonsense,” Vohro said, lifting himself up from his son, finally able to compose himself enough to walk without help. “That can’t possibly happen.”

The air and mist reigned for a moment, and silence spread across the mouths of the Davinian warriors.

“Oh, but it can!” shouted a golden voice coming forth from the tunnel. A lonely old warrior crept out of the hole and was immediately helped out of the earth by everyone who stood near him. Siel had managed to travel the passageway to safety after he had defeated Mahlevenieh.

“Alta!” Vohro said, rushing up to him. “Are you all right?”

“Only time will tell,” Siel said.

“Alta, is what you say about the fog true?” said one second-blade Davinian, doe-eyed, wanting to take as much knowledge as possible.

“I’m afraid so, my brave student,” Siel said.

“So the sun sets for good,” said another Davinian.

“Tonight, my students, we lament the death of the sun,” Siel said solemnly with a face that told of an impending doom.

Hearing those words come out of their beloved leader dampened the Davinians’ spirits. They turned to the land in the horizon and saw horrible things. The tyrant fog covered the sky like a quilt of gray, fattened clouds, and along with the gray smoke came a thunderous windstorm made of the blackest dirt; it was so enveloping that it literally made the buildings appear as if they were being buried under the encompassing earth.

The sun descended into darkness; it had turned weak in its brilliance and was acting in a manner akin to being deathly ill. The fog was the victor of this long battle. It had laid claim to the skies, and darkness was now triumphant over the land of Bune. Alas, as Logrec had boasted earlier, there would be no sun, no daytime, but only night. The sun would no longer be seen come morning. Only the fog and dirt would remain in the land, without a trace of the sun’s rays to remind men of warmer days. The enemies of the sun had successfully brought about a darkening of the land, and they had turned the moors of that *dreary romance* into a sunless country.

The Davinians and their people stood at the edges of Loshendu Forest, weeping as they said their goodbyes to the sun; they knew deep within their hearts they might not live to bear witness to it again. A moment passed, and everyone stood still, mourning the sun’s passing. At long last, the sun diminished into the west.

Darkness remained.

“Will we see the sun again?” Vehru said his father.

“As long as this fog exists, nothing bright can shine,” Vohro replied.

“The sun has set before your eyes, my brave Davinians,” Siel said, mustering up enough strength to speak up. “Let not the sun set in your hearts.”

Vohro realized that Siel suffered much, and as the Alta watched his school being torn to pieces, his spirit drained from him, and the Alta made a fainting gesture but was caught by one of

the Flowers of Heatheranla. Lereh helped him to a nearby tree where he could sit and lean on the spacious trunk.

“There’s someone coming!” shouted one Davinian just as Siel finished sitting down on the floor.

Alerted, the Davinians readied themselves for another fight, but were stopped by Vohro’s intervention. “Be still!” Vohro said. “I know who comes.”

It was Elba, and with her were a group of other Rohpas. She had brought her healing caravan and a great number of horses as aid to the Davinians. The Rohpadors came around and embedded themselves into the large crowd of students, of which a majority suffered many wounds. They quickly set up a camp around them, offering various healing stations so they could tend to the ailing warriors of Daví.

After Vohro had readied his mind, he looked into Elba’s eyes and asked her what she did not want to be asked. “What happened to Prince Druuk?”

Elba’s eyes sloped downward. “I don’t really know, Mastro. He asked me to deliver a message to his brother and the king, and that’s how I left him, in his room, in peace.”

“So you don’t know if he’s still alive?”

“I’m sorry. That would be impossible. The castle was overwhelmed with those creatures. He was defenseless. The king was slain by Mahlevenieh, and his brother, as far as I know, was consumed by the fire.”

Vohro took a moment to grieve for his best friend.

“And what of Luca, Mastro?” Elba said with trepidation.

“Yes, where is the young prince?” another Rohpador asked.

That was a good question. Where did the exile end up? In the midst of all the commotion, the Davinians had completely forgotten about their beloved friend.

Lereh overheard the old Rohpa’s inquiry, and her eyes bloomed, as if remembering something she had promised herself never to forget. *Luca.*

All of a sudden, as if everyone had just woken up from a trance, the Davinians began to bounce off their whispers into the air.

Luca. Where is he? Where is the boy? What happened to the fallen Davinian? Where is the exile? He was taken. He was pulled up into the sky.

“We’ll find Luca,” Siel said, who had garnered enough energy to raise himself up and walk

about. "But first we must tend to other things." Siel walked up to the crowd of students and officials surrounding him.

"We'll journey to Corco, where we'll reopen the school. The Order will survive; it *must* survive. Some of you will come with us, and some of you will have to depart from us. The lesser blades should prepare to journey to your homes. There you'll wait until the land is strong enough; there you'll anticipate for the sun to send you its rays. And yet others will have a specific quest to complete."

Siel called on a few of his Davinian Mejurs. "Gather all who will come with me to Corco, and gather those who will begin their journeys home, including the people of Bune, and send them on their way. See to this immediately."

"Yes, Alta!" they all said.

"Jeskun!" Siel said as he called for him. "Where is Jeskun?"

A few yards away, near a somber tree standing at the edge of the forest, sat Jeskun with his head between his knees and his hands atop his head. He had been conscious for a while but had managed to sneak away from the pack. He leaned against the tree, taking in the moonlight, lamenting the loss of his Rasplendur, never mind that he suffered bruises and needed to be attended to. Siel walked over to him. "I need you, loyal servant."

Jeskun did not answer.

"Davinian, look up," Siel said.

Jeskun managed to raise his head so he could set his eyes on Siel.

"Raise your arms."

"My arms? What for?"

"Raise them, Mastro," Siel said with more vigor.

So Jeskun did what he was told and raised his arms to Siel, and when he did so, Siel proceeded to take off both of his gauntlets housing his Engal and Ersengal blades and placed them on Jeskun's forearms. "For the valor you have shown these past few days," Siel said as he strapped them on his arms. "You have lost a blade but have gained two more. You are now a master of the *nine blades*, two of which they were, now, there are three of us: myself, Vohro, and...you."

"Alta, that is truly an honor, but I cannot take your blades."

"These will do for now. You'll return them to me when your quest is complete."

“My quest?”

“You are to accompany a group of Davinians to the Sunless Land, the Land of the Crescent Moon.”

“Yes, High Servant. But is not our land now a sunless land?”

“Our land pales in comparison to where you’ll be going. You’ll go to seek the beast, the true beast. There you’ll wait for Luca, for though I had advised him against it, he will try to seek the beast himself, to seek his mother.”

“His mother?”

“Yes. Now go and gather your group.”

“Right away, Alta!” Jeskun said as he stood up and bowed to him. He departed from Siel and into the direction of the crowd.

Siel saw Elba preparing a horse, so he stepped her way for some words. “Where are you heading, Lady Elba?” Siel inquired upon reaching her.

“To search for Luca,” Elba said, “and I’m wasting valuable time. He was taken by the Umbrador, but he’ll wake up alone, and he’ll fear the dark. Prince Druuk’s last will was to have me guard over him during his exile, and I’m bound to his last plea.”

“Of course you are,” Siel said, “and I’m confident that you’ll find Luca. If he’s in danger, you must hurry, so I understand.”

“I’ll leave my Rohpadors with you to tend to the Davinians.”

“Thank you for that. But as Druuk asked of you one thing, may I do the same?”

“What is that, Alta?”

“That on his exile, you may guide Luca first to a certain place before he goes searching for his mother.”

“His mother? But how did you know about his mother?”

“Lady Elba, it is hard for him who believes himself to be a fool to not know all the foolish things that come from those who believe themselves to be wise. Thus, I know of Luca’s foolish ideas before they are known to him and to everyone else. I know that he’ll undertake searching for his mother against my advice, but he’s his own Davinian now. I can only offer the path to wisdom, not give it to him. Persuade him not to seek his mother, but if he still insists, have him visit somewhere first.”

“Name it, High Servant.”

“To start off his exile, I want you to reach the land of Sabbahdo, to the Southeast of Esterra.”

“Sabbahdo? What is there, Alta?”

“There you will find and talk to Wesper, an old friend.”

“And why should we take counsel with him?”

“If indeed the sword is not his to keep like Luca expressed, then he must return it whence it came from, and Wesper will be the one to help him on that which he seeks to do. And if that is not a good enough reason, tell him to do it because I asked him to.”

“I’ll see to it, Alta.”

“Very well, Elba,” Siel said, putting his hand on Elba’s horse. “Remember, old healer, return him to me. I’ll be waiting.”

“I’ll do my best,” Elba said as she embraced Siel’s hand with his own, “but Alta, before I leave, I must have my Rohpas treat your wounds.”

“Woman, the wounds that I have your Rohpas cannot treat,” Siel said, turning away from Elba.

“Who is the fool now?” Elba said.

And with those words, Siel stopped and turned to Elba, and he pondered. “*I am.*”

Elba put her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t underestimate my Rohpas’ powers of healing,” she said, looking into his eyes.

At that moment, Siel saw what Elba truly was. “Woman, because you have healed so many, you can heal many more,” Siel said. “I have learned a lesson. Goodness is not lessened but multiplied when divided, thus the more good you do, the more good you *can* do, and the more good will exist in the world. Come, maidens of goodness,” Siel said, letting Elba’s Rohpas help him walk over to the healing station. “Take me to your station.”

Siel directed one last smile at Elba before being led off by her healers. As Siel departed, Vohro limped his way to Elba. He carried something with him and placed it by her feet. “Lady Elba,” Vohro said. “Please, take this. It’s a new leg I had forged for Luca out of the most durable metal. When you find him, please give him this as a gift from his friends. He should appreciate it.”

“Yes, he will,” Elba said. “Thank you, Mastro Vohro.” And the mastro departed from her.

Once Vohro reached the caravan, he sat next to Siel, but not before saying his goodbyes to Vehru, who had been chosen by Mastro Jeskun to be part of the team in charge of seeking out the

beast.

“Your son will be all right; he is a formidable Davinian, like his father,” Siel said to his longtime pupil.

“I told him to visit his mother one last time before he left,” Vohro said. “I had her flee to our home in Nawa a few days ago, for I sensed things were to go a foul, as they truly did.”

“Are you ready to take this journey with me, Vohro?” Siel said in a sincere manner.

“Of course, I am!” Vohro said right away.

“I say this because I’m increasingly becoming weaker by the hour, and with that, I’ll be more useless to you. I fear I’ll become dead weight. Now, contrary to what you may think, my soul is not attached to the school, but suffers because of all the knowledge that has been lost with the burning of the stones. There is another school, as you know, that we must bring to life. Then, and only then, will my life be spared. So, there will come a time when the burden of our trip will be placed solely on your shoulders.”

“My shoulders are strong, Alta,” Vohro said. “But yours are strong as well. Don’t count your demise just yet.”

“I’m only making plans,” Siel said. “A man without a plan is a tree in the ground. Why be animated if there is no work to be done?”

Mastro Jeskun approached the two master Davinians as they were being attended to by Elba’s Rohpas. “The team has been assembled and ready to go, Alta,” Jeskun said, who was now bandaged and on his journey to recovery.

“And whom will you be taking?” Siel said.

“Vehru of Nawa, Kahsy of the Plains of Neveten, Jené Jenóu of Janvai, Luleh and Lereh of Heatheranla, Tamru of Nawa, Swaso of Reyhdor, Pabru of Bune, and Nefiru, a prince of Corco.”

“I don’t think the Corcoban family will be pleased of this,” Vohro said. “I wouldn’t expect a warm welcome.”

“Regardless, I think that’s a good choice,” Siel said. “Though, the older flower of Heatheranla must not go with you; I have other plans for her. Let this be known to Lereh. Don’t waste any more time, Jeskun. Be on your way.”

“All right, Alta,” Jeskun said as he smiled at both of them and stood in their midst for a few seconds, as if saying one last goodbye to his fellow mentors.

“Good travels,” Vohro said. Jeskun turned and walked away to join his group.

Across the camp, Elba made her final preparations, and she could not get the thought of Luca being in peril out of her mind, so she had to stop and steady her breaths. A young girl on a horse came upon her.

“So are we all set?” Lereh said.

“We?”

“I was to go with Mastro Jeskun’s team, but the Alta asked me to accompany you instead.”

“Young Flower, the journey I’m about to undertake is a perilous one. You can’t comprehend the forces we’ll encounter.”

“Lady Elba, am I not Davinian?”

“What you are makes little difference in the war we will be seeking.”

“War?”

“Yes, war, a war that will transcend the world as you know it.”

Shocked, Lereh stared at the elder Rohpa, and she reached for the medallion she kept tied around her neck. She rubbed it a few times. “Rohpa, you’ll need my blades, for we’ll be coming upon all sorts of beasts.” Lereh said this with a hidden insight, something that she had discovered a long time ago, and Elba knew that this young girl had seen many things and knew much more than the average Davinian.

“Very well, Lereh. We’ll go together to find the boy and head out to seek his mother.”

“His mother?”

“Yes, Flower. Luca will be seeking his mother in the very depths of despair. And we’ll go with him. But first we must find him in the forest, for I sense him there—and I fear he’s not alone.”

“Who’s with him?”

Elba’s eyes turned, as if she now belonged to another world. “You don’t want to know.”

And without hesitation, both of them set off on their horses through the crowd of Davinians. Before leaving them, Lereh rode up to Vehru. “Take care of my sister, little one,” she said.

“Little one?” Vehru said.

“Just take care of her,” Lereh said, trotting away from him while Vehru watched them make their descent into the darkness of the forest.

Vehru turned and ran up near the edge of the camp, where Mastro Jeskun had already gathered his party. The mastro came upon them on his horse and cried, “We have a beast to

catch. It's a long road ahead to the sunless land. We must make haste. Come now, come, you sons and daughters of the sun!"

Jeskun tapped his horse on its side and it made a wailing sound as it galloped away into the horizon while the rest of the party did their best to keep up.

"Let's go, friend!" Pabru said as he rode off. "Another adventure in the cover of night!"

Vehru quickly mounted his horse and sped off to regroup with his team.

Siel watched the team trot down the sloping hills and in the direction of the crescent moon. He stood amidst the aftermath of the burying of the land and pondered on what was to come next.

"You're already thinking about what will be our next step," Vohro said. "Are you not?"

"A wise man does not need to ponder on his next step," Siel said. "For that is easy. You just place your foot in front of the other and start walking."

"Where is Corco?" Vohro said with a smile.

"To the North."

"So to the North we shall make our first step," Vohro said.

Siel smiled first at his beloved mastro, but then his face turned serious.

"Your thoughts are with Luca," Vohro said, who also had his own thoughts on the fallen servantu.

"Elba and Lereh are already on their way to him," Siel said. "He must be lonely in that forsaken forest."

"Luca is a strong lad, like his father was. They will get to him soon enough." Vohro reached out to his Alta. "Come now, we must begin on our journey." And they started to make their preparations.

Meanwhile, inside the blackened air of Loshendu Forest, Luca's eyes opened up to total darkness, and he panicked. Stricken with fear, he raised himself up from the ground where he had been laying for some time. He turned to the sky and saw the tops of trees with their branches reaching out, as if they were in some infinite duel against each other.

"Loshendu Forest," he whispered. *How did I get here? It must have been the Umbrador.* He turned his head to his left and right but could not see any speck of light around him. He reached to his side and felt his traveler's bag, which somehow had been miraculously tied to his waist.

He reached inside the bag and pulled out what he needed to build a small fire.

Luca labored for a few minutes in complete darkness, huffing and puffing at the flames. And in the silence, one could hear the grinding of sticks. After much strain, a small spark appeared and brought life back into the dead space. Luca blew on the small fire, and it steadily began to grow into something more useful, and now he could see about ten feet on all sides of him. Though, he insisted on seeing more of the space around him, so he kept at it.

The boy knelt in front of the fire once again, trying to breathe life into the flames, when it happened: all the little hairs across his body shot up in full attention. A dire feeling crept up his toes and surfed on the waves of his nervous energy, sparking currents of anxiety swimming through his young veins. Never had he felt the need to discern as much as he needed to that very moment. Nothing could ever have made him feel that way except for something utterly horrible. He was frozen; his thoughts were impotent.

Something had crept up behind him, something he had never come across in his entire life. He saw a shadow sweep up and totally drown out the light given out by the struggling fire. It felt as if the largest living animal had come in for the kill. He sensed the stench of fecal matter all around him rapidly turning into a disarming bouquet of flowering scents.

And the beast breathed down Luca's neck. Its breaths bullied the fire into submission, and Luca's heart sunk.

"Turn and look at me, my son," the Gremleh said.

And Luca's eyes trembled in horror.

End of Book I

AFTERWORD

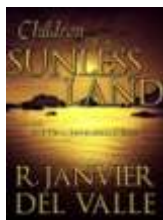
Thank you for purchasing **Sword from the Sky, Book I: The Blade School of Daví**. I do hope that it entertained you.

Book II of Sword from the Sky is finally finished! It will be available early December 2013. In the meantime, if you want to learn more about the characters of Sword from the Sky, you can take a look at my **Deaf Swordsman Series**, which chronicles the adventures of Vohro and his pupil Jeskun (among others) during their younger years.

As a matter of fact, if you subscribe to my newsletter at: www.rjanvierdelvalle.com/sign-up-form, you will receive the first FOUR installments of the Deaf Swordsman Series for FREE!

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No. 1: Children of a Sunless Land – a short story



*Told in **serial form**, the Deaf Swordsman Series is a collection of stories featuring the fantastical deaf swordsman, Vohro Vahlenu. These set of stories is a sprawling epic of good and evil, bringing together the supernatural and weird, featuring dark fantasy adventures sure to resonate with both the hardcore and casual reader of dark fantasy literature.*

The stories begin and end in chaos, promising the reader a wild ride through the darkest bowels of the imagination while offering moments of deep reflection. Here are the terror-inducing tales of children clad in beastly armor, of people consumed by their own shadows, and of dark nights spent under the auspices of an angry moon.

Embark on perilous journeys into unknown places like an abandoned asylum floating in the open, midnight sky, or an eerie forest characterized by the continuous sounds of echoing

whispers. These are some of the places you'll venture into, following a fierce avenger armed with nine of the deadliest blades known to mankind, as he rides from the seen into the unseen, where hope and doom are bound only by the thinnest threads of humanity.

No. 2: The Abandoned Asylum of the Good Dr. Fangtasahd – a novella



After weeks of lengthy travel, Vohro is forced to pursue a young boy who abruptly steals his champion horse. Capturing him with ease, the deaf warrior eventually lets the boy go, only to have the young thief beg to be trained as a Davinian Blademaster. Unwilling at first, Vohro slowly warms up to the boy, and recognizing certain qualities in the boy that reminded him of how he once was, Vohro gives into the boy's wishes. Soon after the two form the bond of teacher and student, they are thrown into a dangerous supernatural world when they infiltrate a mystifying floating temple, landing in the trenches of the good Dr. Fangtasahd's Asylum. Inside, they witness the horrors committed by the supernatural doctor-beast, ultimately leading them into the abyss of a womb-like temple which harbors a sacrificial table known as "The Altar of Men." After a fierce struggle with the perilous forces living inside the asylum, the boy is forced to escape, and fearing his teacher dead, leaves Vohro behind to an unknown fate.

*This installment introduces a new character, **Jeskun bal Janvai**, a young beggar thief who, by his own merit, is accepted by Vohro to be his first pupil—and mischievous companion.*

No. 3: Along the Many Houses of Damnation – a novella



Under his teacher's orders, Jeskun takes Vohro's horse, Dahkar, and makes his way southward towards the moorlands, where the Davinian School lies, in order for him to meet and train with Mastro Siel, who is head of the First Blades of the School of Daví. But during the

journey, things take a turn for the worse when he runs into Wesper Forest, a hundred-mile long woodland region forsaken by the ugliest of spirits, full of thousands of trails and paths specifically made to confuse the traveler, sending Jeskun down a perilous whirlwind of mental anguish—and into the arms of a horrific creature.

*This installment introduces a new character, **Wenden (Wend) Nahn of the Wespering Clan**, a fiery young huntress who begins to clash heads with Jeskun from the outset of their first encounter.*

No. 4: Beauty in a Land of Sorrow – a novella



Beauty in a Land of Sorrow is the fourth installment in the Deaf Swordsman Series. A novella in length, the overall story focuses on the main characters' attempt at finding beauty in the dreariest of fortunes. Join Vohro, Jeskun, and Wend, along with their new Davinian friends, Sunasar and Ebar, on an adventure-filled journey down a road of beauty, love, jealousy, electrifying surprises, and deep humiliation.

After narrowly escaping Wesper Forest, Jeskun wakes up energized and hopeful only to find himself in the torrential rains of a windy mountain village. Without a moment to gather his thoughts, Jeskun is thrown into a perilous mission involving his teacher and a dubious plot to find a cure for the Blade School of Davi's ailing headmaster.

Not wanting to make their way across the Sunless Land, the Davinian traveling company dives into an undiscovered region of Esterra, casting their lot into a spiritual darkness threatening to extinguish the fleeting hopes nestled deep within their souls. A surprise ambush catches the Davinians off guard, ultimately forcing the traveling party to surrender to their captors and heightening the intensity of the Davinian's chances for survival.

Following a failed rescued attempt, the Davinians are yet again thrown into a menacing world of the insane and psychotic when they are selected to undergo a horrible and outlandish test inside a massive aging castle. There, they must make a stand against a ruthless leader known as the King of Sorrow and bring to light a thousand-year-old secret regarding the Tomb of

Voices, a horrid hole in the ground used by the king to punish all who are not marked with his infamous Sign of Insanity.

*This installment of the series introduces three new important characters. **Elandra (Ela)** **Elissieh** of the Iron Arches, **Sunasar the Knower** and **Ebar the Silent**.*

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