



HOLLOW WORLD

HEIR
OF THE
HUNTED

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(BOOK ONE OF THE HOLLOW WORLD)



BY RICHARD T DRAKE



CHAPTER ONE

RADYN INCHEDED OPEN his eyes. Above, the sky was dark, the stars white, stark and innumerable. Wisps of cloud drifted lazily below. He lay there for a moment, sprawled on the caravan roof listening to the sounds of the great forest, wondering what had awoken him.

Then, as consciousness dawned, he became aware of a familiar tightness in his bladder. That was quickly followed by the awareness that his chosen sleeping place was somewhat lumpier than usual. Radyn winced. Lifting his hips, he pulled the half-empty bottle out from under him and slumped back to the canvas.

The discovery prompted a sudden rush of images from the evening's celebrations. His brow knotted, then relaxed. Nothing too embarrassing, which was good. Unlike that time in Wissleshire... It had taken him weeks to live that one down. He figured it was one of the hazards of being the youngest in a travelling company.

He opened and closed his dry mouth experimentally, probing his mind for the headache sure to be waiting. There was only a brooding tingle, but he could sense the full and nasty beast lurking beyond, ready to pounce from the shadows. If he could get back to sleep quickly he should be able to slumber through the worst of it. Otherwise he would have to see old Brolda in the morning for one

of her potions. And *she* always wanted a hug, and her caravan smelled like things that made Radyn want to cough.

But first, his bladder was growing more insistent. If he could attend to that without waking too fully he should be able to resume his slumber without much difficulty. He checked the night sky. The pale blue moon was round, but not quite full, floating in the sky just above the treetops. The larger, silver moon had already set. Radyn guessed it was about three hours after midnight. Plenty of time to sleep off a hangover.

Voices floated to him from the camp below. It seemed not everyone had retired. Still, the voices were few, perhaps only a handful. He frowned and listened more intently, then grimaced. Uric. Radyn recognised his foster father's gravelly chuckle immediately.

Radyn lifted his head just high enough to peek over the caravan's sideboards. The convoy had set up for the night in a place where the forest road widened into a clearing. The caravans were arranged in a semicircle against the clearing's edge, allowing space enough for travellers to pass. No two caravans were the same size or shape, making an odd silhouette in the pale blue moonlight.

The ancient trees of the Rolwood Forest surrounded the camp, casting all beyond into darkness, their leafy canopies swaying in the night. A campfire still glowed in the convoy's centre. Uric and Baergin the warrior sat around the dwindling flames, along with two of the mercenaries, Monjo the illusionist, and the company fire tamer Skyg the grodgolyte.

The conversation didn't look like finishing anytime soon. Their voices were respectfully hushed, but their words carried an

excited click that Radyn recognised. He supposed that after a year on the road the mercenaries would be just as happy to be heading home as the rest of them.

Uric was holding court as usual. Radyn could see his foster father's pipe smoke chugging skyward between his words. Radyn suspected that was what Uric enjoyed most about being leader of the company: people felt obliged to listen to his stories. If Uric spotted Radyn he would surely be called over, and any chance of getting back to sleep would be quickly ruined.

Trying to stay as low as possible, Radyn hoisted himself up onto his haunches, gripping the sideboard against a sudden wave of nausea. He took a breath, let the dizziness pass, and vaulted over caravan's side, landing in a half crouch between the carriages and the tree line.

Radyn peered into the tangle of roots, shrubs, and gloom that lurked between the ancient trunks, choosing his path. He was going to have to venture into those woods; relieving yourself too close to the carriages was frowned upon. Besides, he wanted to find the little brook he had used for this purpose earlier. Its babble provided just the right ambience. He took a quick glance along the carriages and stepped into the forest.

The Rolwood was pitch black. Radyn stomped sleepily through the foliage and shadows, the forest's little creatures clicking and chattering about him. As he wound his way deeper, images from similar trips that evening flashed back to him. Quiet, solitary journeys, full of contemplation. Somehow being alone always seemed more profound when you had been drinking. After a few

more steps he caught the sound of water, but as he pushed his way through the trees onto the open bank his mouth fell open.

Instead of the little brook, he had come upon a lake. One half the size of Devonridge.

Radyn frowned at the lake and then back toward the camp in confusion. Something had gone seriously wrong with his directions. He must have remembered the path wrong. After all, when he had visited the brook the other times he *had* been drinking.

The massive lake floated tranquilly under the quiet night. Its velvet-smooth waters were a mirror of the starry heavens, the blue moon rippling gently across its surface. The forest hugged the water close on every bank.

Somewhere near the opposite shore a large rock was jutting out from the water. Radyn let out a yawn and squinted. It was hard to make out from this distance, but he thought he recognised the rock's distinctive silhouette. *Old Man Boulder*. Yes, he was sure of it. The only problem was, Old Man Boulder jutted out of Tibble Lake – a lake that lay almost a day's ride from here, only a couple of hours from Devonridge. There was no way this lake could be Tibble Lake. Radyn squinted with a little more effort and took a step closer.

Straight into the icy water. He jerked his soaking foot back with a gasp. The lake's chilly waters seeped through his boot, shooting up his leg and straight into his mind, instantly banishing any hope of sleep.

Clear and thorough wakefulness. Radyn could almost hear his looming headache laughing. Only then did he notice he was still holding the half-finished bottle of spirits. *Well, there's more than one way to beat a hangover*, he thought dryly and, placing the bottle on the

bank, made clear his disdain for the lake by relieving himself into its waters.

Radyn rebuckled his pants and picked up the bottle, found a decent-sized rock on the shoreline, and sat on it. He stared down at his soaking boot. At least the boot was tall, not the ankle-high cut fashionable in the Outer Circle. He supposed he had Uric to thank for that one.

Radyn's outfits – or *costumes* as Uric was fond of correcting – were a constant arguing point between Radyn and his foster father. A bright blue tunic with puffy sleeves and a flamboyantly wide collar. It was little wonder the girls Radyn spoke to spent most of the conversation giggling behind their hands.

The serious girls, as Radyn thought of them, always seemed more interested in Dace the bard, with his gentlemanly charisma, or Baergin's muscled mercenaries. Radyn was lean, but he wasn't well-built like the fighters. He wasn't short, but he wasn't exactly tall either. His hair was too dark to be considered blonde – something of a rarity in this part of the Circle of Kingdoms – but it wasn't dark enough for the brooding looks the girls so admired. And Uric hadn't even considered the idea when Radyn had wanted to grow it.

Radyn scooped up a pebble from the shore and skimmed it across the water, rippling the stars' reflection. What he really wanted were some friends his own age. The only company members that were even close were the twins from Zahedia, and Radyn had always found them a little, well, *Zahedian*.

The trouble was the company never stayed in one place long enough to get to know anybody. They just visited the same old towns year after year, performing the same old shows to the same

old people. And when Radyn wasn't doing that he was training, practising the same old leaps and tumbles. Even the cheering crowds no longer inspired him.

Radyn sighed out over the moonlit lake, watching the trees on the shore sway in the night. Lately he found himself longing for someplace constant, something that felt like a home, like Devonridge had been before he had left to travel with the company. He wanted to do something meaningful with his life. The problem was, he didn't have the slightest idea what that might be. But the more he thought of it, the more he found himself thinking that when they got to Devonridge this year he might like to stay. Permanently.

Radyn was about to take a swig from his bottle when he shivered, feeling the eerie tingle of eyes upon him. He turned to find Grol the burveeg sitting on the bank a few feet away.

"What are you doing here?" Radyn asked. "You should be guarding the camp."

Grol just sat there on his broad and furry rump, his wide snout open, his tongue lolling happily.

Radyn grinned as he gleaned the burveeg's intention, which, Radyn supposed, wasn't entirely unreasonable given that he was sitting by a lake.

"I'm not fishing," he told the animal. "I don't have any other food either."

At the pronouncement, Grol shut his snout and tilted his thick head. His black eyes moved down to Radyn's bottle and back up again hopefully.

Radyn shook his head. "Hunt your own food. You're supposed to be a burveeg." He did his best to scowl and look menacing, but was fairly certain the burveeg saw through it.

Grol had been Radyn's pet for years, ever since he awoke one morning to find the cub sitting on his chest, looking down at him expectantly. Grol hadn't left Radyn's side since. Only now, when Grol stood on all fours, he came up to Radyn's stomach.

As far as he knew, Grol was the only tame burveeg in existence, this exotic rarity being the only reason Uric had let Radyn keep him. It was good for the show. Grol might have had the gentlest of natures, but he still sported the dagger-like claws and teeth that earned the rest of his kind their fearsome reputation.

Grol lifted himself off his rump and padded over to where Radyn was sitting, nosing his snout under Radyn's hand to procure a pat.

"What do you think, boy?" Radyn asked, scratching Grol through his long brown fur. "How would you like to stay in the same place for a while? There's plenty of food in Devonridge."

Radyn took a slow and thoughtful drink from his bottle, his scratching hand falling still and slumping to his side. With his gaze fixed on the lake, he didn't notice Grol moving away again.

"I'm just worried that we might miss everybody," he added quietly.

That's where Radyn started to get confused. Luckily, for the next two weeks, he didn't have to think about it. For now, all the practice and performing were over. He was going home to Devonridge and with it the fourteen nights of revelry known as Autumn Festival.

Radyn couldn't wait. He had written ahead to his best friend Cune to make sure that he was ready. It was going to be a time for catching up, trading stories, and if the friends' past adventures were anything to go by, trouble. The exciting kind of trouble.

"Well, whatever happens, we're going to have fun," Radyn said, looking over at Grol. The burveeg had given up on the prospect of fish and was now rolling on his back on the shore, biting at imaginary enemies. Radyn's gaze moved back to the water.

That was when he saw the star. He noticed it in the lake first. A flash of crimson floating amongst the stars' reflection. His head snapped skyward. High in the heavens, amongst the perfect white stars, was a red one. And it seemed to be growing.

Or... getting closer? Radyn stood and craned his neck, his gaze locked on the star. He closed one eye and lifted his bottle toward the sky, using it as a scale. The star was definitely growing. Or falling, rapidly.

A red star? Radyn had heard of Syrentus and the golden star which led the first men to Calambria, but he had thought that was just a tale. Maybe stars really did come in different colours. He looked over to see if Grol had noticed, but the burveeg was still rolling about on the lakeside.

Radyn turned back to the sky and gasped. The star's size had doubled, and it was coming straight for him. It was right there above the cloud line, blazing through the heavens like a plummeting sun, a crimson tail streaking in its wake. He could hear a faint roar, something between a flame's crackle and the rush of a waterfall.

The crimson star and its watery reflection were rushing toward each other at unbelievable speed. The lake began to churn and bubble, slowly at first, then growing more agitated. Its roar became deafening. The star was right above them.

Radyn watched it all in stunned wonder. A little voice in his mind told him they were about to be obliterated, but he couldn't seem to make his limbs move. He glanced at Grol. The burveeg had stopped mid-roll and was watching the sky intently. Then the star did the most astonishing thing of all.

It stopped.

Suddenly, all was silent. The star was completely motionless. It just hovered there, some thirty yards above. Its light was brilliant yet painless to gaze upon. If anything it was a soothing glow, melding into the night so seamlessly it made the star's size impossible to gauge. Below, the lake was still and breathless. It seemed like time itself had frozen.

The moment was fleeting. A terrific boom thundered through the night, shaking the world. The star burst into motion. Sideways.

It took off, firing away over the forest like a blazing arrow. An echo of power rippled in its wake, blasting Radyn back into the water.

As he sat there, the cold lake lapping about his chest, watching the star fly away, something stirred inside him. He realised he didn't want that star to get away. He wanted to catch it. He wanted to catch that red star more than he had wanted to do anything in his whole life, and he was damned if he was going to let it escape that easily.

A second later Radyn was on his feet, sprinting into the forest. He could just make out the star through the leafy canopy, blazing across the dark sky.

Radyn ran as fast as he could ever remember. The forest's shadows whipped past in a blur. His wet boots squelched, dead leaves scrunching underfoot. He was dimly aware of Grol bounding along behind him. And while that was happening, Radyn found himself thinking two quite detached and unrelated thoughts: first, it was lucky the star was heading in the direction of the caravans; and secondly, it was a good thing he had found this forest path, which he had completely missed on the way to the lake in the first place. He glanced down just in time to catch a road sign whisk by, its arrow pointing back to the shoreline, its neat little words announcing: *Tibble Lake*.

Radyn's gaze snapped back to the sky. He snatched glimpses of red through the branches and leaves. Unbelievably, he was keeping up with the star, despite its velocity. He began to think he might even catch it.

Light was shining through the trunks ahead: the forest road. He could see where the trees ended. Radyn burst from the forest. And froze.

For a moment he just stood there, gaping, his mind grappling with the implications of what he saw. The star had vanished, completely. But that wasn't the only thing that had disappeared.

So had nighttime. It was suddenly day. The sky beamed a clear and unbroken blue. Daylight stung Radyn's eyes, which only moments before had looked up at starry heavens. The moon had departed, replaced by a golden sun.

Radyn wiped a palm across his chest then felt his arm. His clothes were completely dry. He shielded his eyes, took another glance at the sun, and shivered. It was more than just daytime. It was the afternoon.

CHAPTER TWO

RADYN STOOD AT the forest's edge, his mouth gaping. The clearing had also disappeared. He was now on the side of a narrow stretch of forest road. The convoy was there but no longer stationary. The caravans were jostling past at full speed, inches from Radyn's nose.

His head moved dazedly back and forth, watching the convoy flash past. The vibrantly coloured caravans, each one garishly dissimilar to the next, rattled by in a kaleidoscopic blur. Enormous spoked wheels clacked along the road, echoing in Radyn's brain. He spotted a few of his colleagues perched behind driver's helms – of those caravans that actually needed drivers – but no-one seemed to notice him.

The whole vision seemed impossible. His mind was spinning, still running through the night, chasing a crimson star, but a voice in his head was growing louder, telling him he was running out of time – running out of convoy – and if he didn't do something quickly he would be walking all the way to Devonridge.

He lifted a groggy hand, entertaining some vague notion of snatching hold of a caravan as it hurtled past. It wasn't much of a strategy. Lucky for Radyn, a strong hand snatched hold of his wrist. The next moment he was sailing through the air. He went with the

momentum and swung, the acrobat in him acting instinctively, landing rump first in the driver's bench of an open carriage.

Dace Majellan smiled as he released Radyn's wrist. "The next time you are thinking of jumping wagon, I would suggest a less isolated location." The bard's eyes returned to the road with a flick of the driving reins.

Radyn blinked, opened his mouth, and then closed it. He was still bewildered over the disappearance of the star – not to mention *nighttime* – but also by Dace's comment. *Jumping wagon*, an old soldier's term for someone abandoning their company. That's pretty much what Radyn had been contemplating when the star appeared in the first place.

With a start, Radyn remembered Grol. He spun around in his seat only to find the burveeg sitting calmly atop an open carriage a couple of carts down, enjoying the wind on his furry face. Radyn turned back around slowly, frowning. His bemused expression drew an arched eyebrow from Dace.

"Had a few drinks, have we?"

"No," Radyn answered, a little too quickly. He glanced over his shoulder at where he had emerged from the forest. "At least not for a while, anyway. I don't think."

Dace's eyebrow arched a little higher. He nodded at Radyn's lap. Radyn's gaze followed. The bottle, he was still carrying it! Radyn cast it over the side with the half-panicked, half-disgusted expression of a man brushing away a spider. The bottle landed with a thud in the undergrowth.

Dace smiled and tilted his wide-brimmed hat – the kind that would have been at home sporting a large feather, only it didn't –

and turned his attention back to the road with another flick of the reins. Radyn couldn't fathom why; their carriage was securely fastened to the one in front, and that one was being pulled by a pair of longhaired olls. But considering Dace it was probably the most sensical thing Radyn had witnessed in the last few minutes. Or was that hours?

The carriage bumped along the forest road. Ancient Rolwood Trees, noble and green, towered over them on either side, making the road shaded and cool. Sunlight washed across their path in dust-filled beams.

Radyn watched it all go by, his mind whirring, his heart thumping, wondering if he was going to vomit. A moment ago he had been running through the forest. Only a moment ago, it had been night! He had been watching the stars! What had happened to morning? Had he just skipped over it? Blacked it out? His memories of the event were fading even as he tried to recall them. Like a dream upon waking, the slippery images grew shadier by the second, leaving only their residue. Yet the *feel* of them remained strong, the feel of the star especially.

Was it possible it had all been some kind of weird dream? After all, he *had* been drinking. Maybe he hadn't gone to the lake at all. He could have been asleep on the roof of his caravan the whole time, rolled off, and woken when he hit the ground.

But if Radyn was going to believe that, he would have to ignore all the glaring holes in the theory. Like the mud on his boots, or the caravan roof having sideboards which made it impossible to fall off. Not to mention the fact that his caravan was three caravans *behind* the one that had picked him up.

Radyn turned to his riding companion, his frown deepening. If there was any person with whom he could imagine discussing the phenomenon without having his sanity doubted it was Dace Majellan.

Ever since he joined the company, Dace had become something of a mentor to Radyn. Radyn could talk to the bard without fear of judgement, something he could say about few of the other adults in the company. Dace was the most knowledgeable man Radyn had ever met. He was also the most travelled, certainly the most famous. There wasn't a person in the Circle of Kingdoms who hadn't heard of Dace Majellan. If there was anybody in the company who might know about disappearing stars...

"Have you ever had something happen to you that you couldn't quite explain?" Radyn asked. He had aimed for a causal tone but hadn't quite succeeded.

Dace eyed him with a mixture of curiosity and mild amusement. "Does this have something to do with your absence this morning?"

Absence? A weight dropped in Radyn's stomach. He hadn't thought about that. He had been so busy examining things from his point of view, he had forgotten about everybody else's. Dream or reality, he hadn't been there while everybody else was having morning. Packing up after a night's camp always took the best part of an hour, and Radyn had missed it.

"Was Uric looking for me?" he asked, wincing.

Dace tilted his head. "He *was* asking around for you. Although he did seem a lot calmer than when he usually finds you skiving out

of work. Now that I think of it, Uric has been acting a little strange this morning himself."

"Himself?"

"Yes. Besides you. Did something happen?"

"No," Radyn said, gripping the sideboard as the wagon took a bump in the road. "Well, nothing between me and Uric or anything. Just me. Actually, I'm not even sure if anything *did* happen. I just kind of experienced something."

"An experience. How interesting," Dace said, smiling again. "Care to describe it?"

"I don't know if I can," Radyn said feebly. "It's kind of hard to put into words." It wasn't, but when Radyn did put those words together in his mind they sounded kind of crazy. Dace seemed to understand enough not to press further.

"Well, perhaps I can help anyway," he said, clapping Radyn's shoulder. "Lack of understanding doesn't always preclude learning. In fact, the most thorough kind of learning is often done through our emotions. *How* we feel about something will always hold greater significance than *what* we think about it."

Radyn nodded. He wasn't sure he understood entirely, but he had grasped enough of it. It was the feeling that mattered. And the feel of the star remained strong, even as his memories of the event blurred and faded. He only needed to picture the star for a second and the emotions would well up inside him, washing over him like a wave. It felt grand, important... inspiring. Yes, that was how Radyn felt: inspired. Whether the experience with the star had been real or not, it had left him feeling better than he had in months.

What did it matter if it didn't make sense? Some rational explanation would surely occur to him later. Something he hadn't figured out yet. He just needed a little more time to think it through, and there would be plenty of time for that *after* Festival. For now, he would just sit back and enjoy the journey. But as Radyn turned his gaze to the forest drifting past them, the feel of the star refused to leave him.

He inhaled deeply, letting the rich, needly aroma of the forest fill his nostrils. The flowers, the damp of the ancient soil. Towering Rolwood trees, deep and vibrantly green, swayed in the Autumn breeze. Butterflies fluttered in crooked patterns through the shade between the trunks.

The convoy bustled through it all, bouncing along the forest road like a giant, wheeled caterpillar. A chugging, gaudy thing, as brash as it was colourful. The cheery weather had lured even the surliest of the company out of their caravans.

As usual, Baergin and his mercenaries rode ahead of the convoy on bantaks, the preferred mounts across Calambria, a kind of large reptile that strode on its powerful hind limbs. Rondolf, the velvet-caped leader of *The Exceptional Bucklers*, rode with them, his fine blade glinting in the afternoon sun. It was said the Bucklers were such expert swordsmen they could slice the seeds from a furry pippler as it fell from the vine.

Old Trelis, the company wingkeep, was atop his caravan a few carts back, his ragged robes and white hair fluttering, scolding toothless Brolda about the smoke from one of her potions. Onn, the giant bacyan, was snoring contentedly in the wagon in front, while the three dokans were huddled on the driver's bench whispering to

each other, their little green faces and hands the only things visible beneath their voluminous robes.

A lump grew in Radyn's throat as he watched them all going about their lives. These were the people he was thinking of leaving. His family. After his mother had died, the company had become everything to him. A hundred adopted parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters. The idea of not having them around anymore broke his heart. Still, the thought of leaving inspired him also. It made him feel grown, independent. Radyn let out a weighty sigh.

"Something troubling you?" Dace asked with another flick of the reins.

"I've been throwing around some ideas, that's all," Radyn said, sitting forward. "Thinking about my future."

"Do you mean that you are leaving the company?" Dace asked, flashing a glance over his shoulder. It appeared Radyn wasn't the only one who thought Uric would find the idea mutinous.

Radyn shrugged. "I'm thinking about it. At least for a little while. You know, just taking a break. There are only so many somersaults a person can do. I haven't completely decided yet," he added quickly, "so don't tell anyone."

"Of course," Dace said, winking. "Your secret is safe with me." His lips turned like he was smiling, but with Dace's curling moustache, it was hard to tell. "Although it sounds like you are not entirely convinced on the best course of action."

"Not entirely," Radyn agreed. "Sometimes I feel like I couldn't bear to leave the company, but then, other times, I just want to try

something new, to be something more than a tumbler in a travelling carnival."

Dace smiled. This time there was no doubt it was more than his moustache. "Well, if you are waiting to find yourself convinced entirely one way or the other, you will be waiting a long time. In fact, that is an excellent strategy for not making a decision at all."

"I know. I guess I'm just scared I'll get it wrong."

Dace's smile faded. "I can't tell you what to do, Radyn. Nor can Uric." He clapped Radyn's shoulder again. "I want you to try something for me. Consider your decision again, but this time, imagine Uric is not around to complicate things." He chuckled at the look of alarm that flashed across Radyn's face. "Don't worry, I have no intention of murdering your foster father."

Radyn smiled back, but his gaze did slide to the curved blade at Dace's hip.

"The point I am making," Dace continued, "is that you should examine your feelings without fear of Uric's reprisal."

Radyn pursed his lips and nodded. Fear of his foster father's reaction had definitely complicated his decision. In Uric's eyes, Radyn leaving the company would be nothing short of treachery.

Uric was the company leader and organised all of their performances. He was in charge of collecting their payments too, but his real profits came from trading. Uric knew the markets of Southern Calambria like no other merchant, and over the years had developed a complex network of vendors and brokers. These days, he could organise a transaction between Wissleshire and the banks of the Thick River without ever leaving his caravan.

Uric had an uncanny knack for sniffing out underpriced treasures. These he would send back to Devonridge, where he had a shop set up that was managed by Radyn's foster mother, Odel. Their house was built in the levels above. The same house into which Uric had taken Radyn and his real mother all those years ago. Radyn wondered what his mother would have said about disappearing mornings and crimson stars. He slumped back into the bench, his gaze turning distant. Silence descended once more.

They broke free of the forest about an hour later. The road slithered out from the trees and ran along the forest's edge, winding its way south toward the hills that shielded Radyn's hometown on the north side. Just beyond lay Devonridge and Autumn Festival.

As the convoy rattled toward the hills, a familiar horn sounded in the distance. A triumphant, brassy note, announcing the arrival of someone of importance at the city gate. It would sound many times before this night was over. The note floated on the air, echoing through Radyn with all the excitement of holidays past.

The eve of Autumn Festival. He could almost smell the extravagant wonder. Tourists pouring in from all over Calambria. Every race represented. Markets selling every smoky ware from every shady corner of the continent. Shows of unimaginable strength. Freaks of unimaginable hideosity. Line upon line of caravans, creating a labyrinth-city unto themselves. Makeshift brothels beside makeshift temples. Fist fights. Duelling. Feats of speed. It was going to be fantastic!

"Well, here we are," Dace announced.

The convoy had rolled to a halt. In front, a queue of caravans led around the hills into the city proper. Some of the company were

already leaving their carriages. With all the traffic it would be quicker from here on foot, and it only took a handful to lead the convoy into town. Uric's status as a prominent local ensured a good docking place.

Trelis was one of the first to get moving. The wingkeep was already leading one of his hwaelen from its trailer. The animal regarded Radyn with large and intelligent eyes as it passed. Radyn recognised the animal as Diver, the smallest of the three hwaelen Trelis cared for.

Radyn had always found hwaelen to be noble creatures. The animal's fine, straw-coloured fur had been well groomed in preparation for Autumn Festival, shining like velvet over its muscular form. Its two pairs of powerful wings were tucked against its sides. When unfurled, a large hwaelen could have a wingspan over twenty feet, making for some spectacular aerial acrobatics.

"I'll leave you to take it from here," Dace said cheerily, vaulting over the carriage side and landing with a crunch in the gravel. "I am sure you will be fine. Just remember: do what is right for you." He dipped his hat, then fell into step with Skyg the grodgolyte and started toward the city.

Radyn sat there watching them go. He wasn't sure what lay ahead of him, but something told him it was going to be interesting. In his mind's eye, he caught a glimpse of the crimson star, and all those feelings washed over him again. His chest swelled and suddenly, just like that, he knew.

Radyn grinned and leapt over the side of the carriage. He had just decided what he was going to do. He had also decided something else.

Telling Uric could wait until after Autumn Festival.

CHAPTER THREE

RADYN PAUSED AT the city gates, ignoring the bumps and shoves as the crowd surged past him, a smile spreading across his lips. The sight of the town made his heart swell. After a year on the road he was finally home.

Devonridge, the heart of Waelock Shire. It was sometimes referred to as a city, but that was due more to its location than size. Its buildings were humble timber and stone. The trees outnumbered the houses, the streets meandering between the ancient trunks.

The main road led away from the gates for a few hundred yards before turning toward the Rolwood River, which bordered Devonridge's south. On the left, running parallel to the road, was Hopper's Hill, the ridge that overlooked the town from the north. To the right, the streets soon petered away, opening onto sprawling grass fields that were already filling with caravans. Autumn Festival. The excitement was tangible. Devonridge was buzzing.

Radyn inhaled indulgently. The aroma of roasted meats and exotic spices fused with the welcoming char of wood fires. Lanterns hung from the branches of the old trees, washing the streets in their glow. Smoke spiralled into an evening sky of magenta and gold. Both moons had already risen. The greater moon was just a sliver, the pale blue moon a slice from a perfect circle.

Vendors were assembling a myriad of stalls, from the colourful to the outright bizarre. There were jugglers, fire tamers, criers, and wrestlers. Laughter rang out over the music of three different bands – only one of which was human and only two of which were actually bands – whose melodies fused into a kind of a light-hearted, folksy harmony that sounded distinctly *Festival*.

A korhl sat on the roadside, its squat body rocking back and forth on its vibrant pink shell, its many limbs furiously plucking an instrument with a seemingly impossible number of strings. People danced in the streets, sloshing brew as they stomped and spun, while a group of farmers scowled their disapproval over frothing mugs on a nearby corner.

For once Radyn didn't feel conspicuous in his puffy sleeved shirt. Autumn Festival attracted visitors from all over the Circle of Kingdoms, bringing an eclectic mismatch of cultures and styles, from the stitched leather and braided hair of the Harafi Sea to the more reserved doublets and skirts that were the fashion in the Northern Circle. Cloth-swathed Andolans, smothered in bandage-like robes, walked beside scantily clad wanderers from the Faded Plains, their tanned bodies as tattooed as their Zahedian cousins.

And that was just the humans. Here and there, the bluish-green skulls of calterians towered over the heads of the crowd. On one corner, a pair of sh'a monks stood quietly watching the crowd surge by, their silken white fur a striking contrast to their charcoal robes. A party of grodgolytes nattered to each other in their clicking tongue, their long and spindly limbs making them seem more like insects than men. Much to Radyn's surprise he even spotted a

diminutive tun scampering about as unabashedly naked as a toddler, his little red arms flapping excitedly.

Radyn gave a flick of Grol's leash and started off through the crowd. People virtually leapt out of the way upon catching sight of a burveeg, even a leashed one, making Radyn's path decidedly easier.

"Nice work, boy," he said with a grin, bending and ruffling Grol's long brown fur. Radyn was eager to slip away before Uric caught up with him. He couldn't wait to immerse himself in Autumn Festival's wonders, but first he needed to stop and say hello to his foster mother, Odel, then he had to cross town to the armoury to pick up his friend Cune. It was a lot to get through before the fun could get started.

"Radyn!"

Radyn flinched, then cursed. *Uric.*

His foster father was standing on the roadside with another man Radyn thought looked familiar, but couldn't quite place. They had both just exited the registry office. Signing in, most likely. Uric was scowling and beckoning. He was probably wondering where Radyn had got to this morning. Radyn groaned and started toward them.

The familiar-looking man's eyebrows lifted at Radyn's approach. "So, Uric, this is your boy the tumbler."

Uric frowned with mock scorn. "He's more of a burden than a bounty, this one," he chuckled, his ever-present pipe bobbing up and down as if in agreement. A stout, pot-bellied man, Uric's cunning little eyes were positioned perfectly midway between his bald pallet and his jungle of a beard.

The smile dropped from Uric's lips, but his pipe stayed clenched firmly between his teeth. "Now, boy, before you go rushin' off and drinkin' yourself silly, I have a request for you."

Radyn nodded and peered over Uric's shoulder, having just noticed his performing partners, Peke and Kip, the athletic twins from Zahedia. Peke was laughing with his sister as they made their way through the crowd. Kip spotted Radyn and waved. Radyn smiled and waved back, doing his best to look as though he hadn't noticed that she was wearing very little, besides a smattering of feathers and a few strategically placed pieces of cloth.

"You listenin' to me, boy?" Uric prodded Radyn in the chest with his pipe for emphasis.

Radyn was still smiling as he turned back to his foster father. He loved feathers. "Yes – don't get drunk."

Uric returned his pipe to his lips and sucked down a drag, blowing it out the side of his mouth. "Get as drunk as you like any other night. It makes little difference to me. You'll be the one with a young man's hangover."

The familiar-looking man nodded his agreement, earning an irritated scowl from Uric.

"Just don't get too drunk *tonight*," Uric said, turning back to Radyn. "Your foster mother hasn't seen you for a year and, for reasons that are lost on me, is eager to see you in the mornin'."

Radyn's brow crumpled. "Why can't I just see her now?"

"Because she'll be with Olla Cropple gettin' things set up for the guild auctions. They'll be busy enough without you gettin' under their ankles."

“Okay then,” Radyn agreed. After all, there was plenty of fun to be had at Festival besides drinking.

“Okay what?”

“I won’t come home drunk.”

“Or too late.”

“That too,” the familiar-looking man put in.

“I won’t do that either,” Radyn said, smiling.

Uric gave a snort that said he wasn’t convinced. “See that you do. You probably need your sleep after last night anyway.”

Radyn blinked. ‘After last night’? What was *that* supposed to mean? Was this one of Uric’s cryptic interrogations? Designed to lure and entrap, Uric’s questions often had you cornered before you even realised what was happening.

“I slept just fine last night,” Radyn said, trying his best to sound casual. “I went to bed before you did.”

Uric took a long drag on his pipe and held Radyn’s gaze. “Well, I don’t know how much sleep you can get lyin’ on the caravan roof. You have a perfectly good bed *in* the caravan.”

Radyn frowned. Uric knew more than he was letting on, Radyn was sure of it. But, at that point, he just wanted to be off into Autumn Festival. He didn’t want to prolong the conversation and risk Uric remembering his unexplained absence this morning.

“Can I go now?”

Uric huffed, disapprovingly. “You better give me the burveeg. I don’t want you runnin’ around town scarin’ the wits out of people. You’ll call down Zodian’s wrath on me,” he added, invoking the name of Oberyon’s king of the gods. Uric still lived his life by the gods the way folk did three hundred years ago. He always made an

offering at the temple upon entering a new town. He said it was good for business.

Radyn handed over Grol's leash, earning a look of betrayal from the burveeg. "Can I go now?" he repeated, giving Grol an apologetic scratch behind the ear.

Uric's brow lowered. "Remember, not too late."

"And not too drunk," the familiar-looking man added, winking.

Uric ignored the comment and continued to stare at Radyn. He sucked down a long and deliberate drag. "And not too drunk."

"I won't, I promise." Radyn meant it sincerely. He had missed his foster mother greatly and didn't want to spoil their reunion by coming home rotten. He nodded his goodbyes to Uric and Grol and the familiar-looking man, and melded away into the Festival throng.

Radyn let the crowd sweep him along. He smiled as he walked, noticing all the forgotten things from his childhood. Unassuming, everyday things that went unnoticed amongst the visiting glamour of Festival. Things that had vanished from mind, but when seen again were unchanged in every way. The fountain they used to race around as boys. The schoolhouse he and Cune had watched from afar. The lane where Cune had trapped the spotted jebbit. The gnarled old tree Cune had hung it from.

Not much had changed at all, and Radyn doubted it ever would. That was just the way things were in Devonridge. As far as towns went it had always been a little on the sleepy side, as long as you forgot those two weeks known as Autumn Festival.

He continued to wind his way through the crowd, cutting diagonally across the road where it bent toward the river. On the

outer corner of the bend loomed Devon's Ridge, the massive hill that had once been home to the town's founder and eventually become its namesake. The mount broke away from the other hills that bordered Devonridge's north, protruding into the town like a pointed finger.

Perched atop it was the *Inn of Good Omen*, the most famous bar in Southern Calambria. The sun hadn't even set and the wooden stairway that zigzagged up the hill to the inn's front door was already brimming with people. So was the grand balcony that overlooked the hillside.

Radyn eyed the inn with a pang, remembering his promise to Uric. The Inn of Good Omen was the thing Radyn had been looking forward to the most, having been younger than drinking age last year. Still, Autumn Festival went for two weeks. There would be plenty of time to pay the inn a visit later.

As he turned into the town square, Radyn's pace slowed to a virtual halt. The area was bursting with people. Used as an unofficial marketplace for Festival, the prime location was always the first to be bagged by vendors and was already crammed with stalls. Two-storey buildings, most of them brick, surrounded the square like a battlement. Colourful streamers were draped from building to building, crisscrossing the square. Lanterns hung from some of the lines, illuminating the marketplace against the falling night.

Radyn stood on his tiptoes and peered over the heads of the crowd. He could just see Cune's uncle's armoury peeking out between two larger buildings on the square's far side. But when Radyn finally made it across the crowded square and arrived at the

armoury he found it closed. His brow crumpled. Maybe Cune didn't get his letter. Radyn was about to walk around the back when a hand clapped down on his shoulder.

"And here I was thinking you had deserted me," a familiar voice said.

Radyn turned and grinned. "Cune."

Cune regarded him with slightly curved lips and glinting eyes – his idea of a smile, one that Radyn always thought looked more like a challenge – and held out a hand.

Radyn shook his friend's hand, and for a moment was struck by how much Cune had changed. Well, not so much changed, but *amplified*. Cune had always been tall, but his frame had filled out to that of a man's, and not a small one. His black hair, which had once dangled in frivolous curls, was now cropped short. His dark eyes were sterner, more serious. And although Cune was only a couple of years older, Radyn thought their age difference had never been more apparent.

Cune seemed pleased with Radyn's surprise, especially when his gaze lingered on the red cloak hanging proudly across Cune's shoulders.

"Are you on duty tonight?" Radyn asked, nodding at the garment.

"I am not," Cune said, his gaze roaming the marketplace, "but Captain Rusk thinks we should portray a strong presence for the tourists." He pointed his chin at a dokan who was stumbling in drunken circles. "It helps dissuade delinquency."

Radyn grinned. Authority suited his friend perfectly. From the time Cune was a child he had wanted to be a member of the town

guards, or 'red capes' as they were commonly known. Not surprising for someone raised in an armoury.

"Shall we get moving?" Cune asked. He started walking before Radyn could answer.

"That's the best suggestion I've heard all day," Radyn said, clapping his friend on the back and falling into step beside him.

The trek across the marketplace proved a lot easier the second time around. Radyn supposed walking with a man who was a head taller than most, not to mention a city guard, helped a little. Some of the stalls were already open, but negotiations were few and half-hearted. The real business would only start tomorrow. Most of the vendors just leaned against their stalls with an ale or a pipe in hand, catching up on once-a-year friendships with those in the stalls around them. Radyn noticed many stalls were adorned with spherical green candles: the token of the god, Tzor, patron of wealth and magic.

"Your company is earning quite the name for themselves," Cune commented as they waded through the crowd.

"We're more popular in some places than others. They were happy to see the back of us in Douth, but I might have had something to do with that."

Cune nodded as if that were a given. "Uric would have had you travelling further then, conquering new territories."

"We made it up to Calla-Daya. That's as far north as we went."

"The magnificent Calla-Daya," Cune said dryly. "The city that boasts fine weather throughout all of the seven seasons."

“Well, we were there for a month in New Spring and all it seemed to do was rain. We saw more sunshine in Tuin-Deen.”

“Tuin-Deen?” Cune’s tone awoke slightly. “I have heard some interesting rumours from the banks of the Thick River. Allegiances shifting back to the Circle. Did you notice any enlisters?”

“Enlisters?”

“Yes, those enlisting. Men building armies. Loyalists, perhaps others.”

Radyn shook his head. “I’m afraid carnival life isn’t that interesting. What about you?” he asked. “How is the soldier’s life treating you?”

Cune looked as if he had smelled something offensive. “A gamekeeper’s life would be more accurate. There have been a few bandit skirmishes, that is all. Most of the time I just stand in some dilapidated watchtower keeping an eye out for stray animals. It’s degrading.” He suddenly brightened. “I did, however, slay two fendree in Deep Winter. Single-handedly.”

Radyn inclined his head, impressed. Many a traveller had met their demise at the end of a fendree’s talons. He wondered how many people in Devonridge had heard the tale. Knowing Cune, probably everybody.

“How about girls?” Radyn asked. “Have you managed to find that someone special?”

Cune flashed a grin. “Alas, I seem to have exhausted Devonridge’s supply of farmers’ daughters. They have this annoying habit of sharing secrets with one another.” He made a snorting sound that might have been a chuckle. “And what about

Radyn Viscere, the travelling carnival star? Have you been sowing your conquests across Southern Calambria?"

"Not really," Radyn sighed. "Girls tend to scare me."

Cune rolled his eyes. "Women simply use the weapons they have. The trick, as with all good adversaries, is to glean their weakness." He twirled a finger. "Get around their defences. Besides, I thought ladies liked dancers."

"I'm an acrobat, not a dancer," Radyn objected, but his ire quickly changed to a grin when he noticed Cune was smirking. His friend had always displayed a fondness for poking fun at his profession.

Radyn was still smiling as Cune led them into the market's outermost lane, between the stalls and the surrounding buildings. That was when Radyn noticed the girl.

She was standing by the roadside, next to a sky blue tent with silver crescents, tracking the friends' approach with interest. Or, more likely, tracking Cune, whose brooding looks regularly gained female attention.

A pair of red capes in full armour passed them and Radyn's view of the girl was broken. The guards nodded curt greetings. Cune responded in kind. Radyn waited until they were out of earshot before speaking.

"Those capes seemed even sterner than usual. You guys expecting trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"At Festival."

Cune raised an eyebrow and there it was again: the smile that wasn't quite a smile. "Festival, my friend, has nothing to do with it."

Radyn got the impression he was about to hear something he didn't want to. He was going to ask anyway when he spied the girl from the sky blue tent heading straight for them. She was wearing a silken shoulderless dress that did little to conceal the curves beneath it. Radyn frowned. With her light brown skin and long dark hair, the girl was an enviable catch. Just Cune's type. Radyn could feel his night slipping away already.

Radyn was surprised then, when upon reaching them the girl addressed not Cune but him.

"Your fortune, sir?" She held out a hand in invitation, pointing back to the roadside and the blue tent.

Radyn's mouth opened, then closed. He wanted to say something witty or charming, ideally a combination of both, but couldn't come up with either. He had spoken to few girls his own age besides Kip, and her regular half-nakedness always left him a little speechless anyway.

With a jolt, he realised he had been silent too long. He also realised he had forgotten what the girl had asked him. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

The girl smiled. "I said 'your fortune, sir?' "

"I think she wants you to hand over your fortune," Cune said dryly.

The girl ignored him and continued to smile at Radyn. "What I meant was, would you like to have your fortune read?"

"What do you think?" Radyn asked, turning to Cune. "It might be fun."

"I think the law frowns upon unscrupulous hustlers fleecing Devonridge's citizens."

The girl's smile vanished. She whirled on Cune, ready to deliver what would have been a scathing retort, until she noticed his red cloak. Instead, she flashed Radyn a pitying look and stalked away through the crowd.

Radyn watched her go, wanting to shout after her, but no words came to mind quickly enough. Then she was gone. He turned back to Cune.

"What did you do that for? She didn't mean any harm."

Cune's glare was the only answer needed. Radyn broke into a grin. It wasn't often he beat his friend at something, especially when it came to capturing the attention of girls. The evening's prospects had just brightened considerably.

"Shall we see what else Festival has to offer?" Radyn asked, waving Cune forward. "I think I spied a stage being readied for Andolan spear duelling on my way over."

Cune merely grunted and started walking. Radyn's grin widened as he fell into step behind. His gaze drifted up to the Inn of Good Omen, its grand balcony sweeping out over the hillside between the trees. He got the feeling this year's Autumn Festival was going to be the best one ever.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BLADE WHISTLED inches from Kyna's face. She leapt back, putting distance between her and her attacker. She readied for the next assault, gripping her longstaff coolly, one end pointed at the ground, the other above her shoulder.

The beast moved. A new position. New angles. A new advantage. She discarded a handful of tactics, shuffled a handful more to the fore of her mind. She did this quickly. So she had been taught. She began to circle her opponent.

The chamber was towering, octagonal, about twelve feet wide. Its meagre light, born from wall-mounted torches, barely contested the shadows. There was only one exit. Flight was not feasible; her opponent was too strong, too fast. She needed to put it down. The beast took an irregular step.

Kyna exploded. Her staff became a blur. She struck. Left side of the skull, then right. Then she jabbed the butt up into the creature's jaw. The beast snarled and lunged, bringing its blade down like an axe. Kyna spun away. The blade crashed into the floor with a burst of sparks and the thundering clang of steel on stone.

Kyna stalked sideways, one foot crossing the other, circling her foe. The beast's massive chest heaved, but whether from fatigue or fury she could not say.

There was little she could decipher. Her opponent was robed, hooded. Humanoid, though clearly alien. Its colossal frame towered well over seven feet. A mystery for which her mind could find no answer. Not in this part of Calambria. Perhaps something omitted from her training. She had already inflicted enough damage to have killed any man. Still it endured.

The beast lunged suddenly, its enormous sword thrust like a lance. Kyna's staff spun, battering the blade away. She struck back, driving her staff into the beast's throat. If it had a windpipe... No effect. Too late, she realised her mistake. The beast's fist closed around her weapon.

The other slammed into Kyna's skull.

Its fist still closed around its sword, the beast backhanded Kyna, launching her across the chamber. She crashed against the wall, the air bursting from her lungs. She crumpled to the floor, showered in stone. Ochre stone, the colour of every stone in this forgotten corpse of a city. Nothing more than ruins, abandoned for thousands of years.

Kyna shook her head. Dark shapes swam across her vision. She curled to her feet warily. The beast made no move to press its advantage. It stood, watching from the shadows of its cowl, its blade gripped in one blue-tinged fist, Kyna's staff clutched in the other.

She wondered if the beast knew. Perhaps something in her eyes betrayed her. Could it see her doubt, her fear? That uncertainty born in the yawning chasm between training and experience?

Kyna's jaw clenched. In the end, it mattered little. Her staff was lost. The beast's kin would be here any second. Her mind

whirred. One by one her options fell away, until Kyna was left with only one.

She was just going to have to kill it.

It was a decision no Alakyte wanted to face. To take a life, or to not: the most ambiguous of all their teachings. How had it come to this? How could it have all gone so terribly wrong so quickly? A second later the beast took the choice away from her.

It charged. Kyna snatched a hand behind her, unhooking a hoop the size of two fists from her belt. The hoop was dull and metallic but blazed to life at her touch, glowing like blue fire: her chakran.

She launched the hoop with a snap of her wrist. Her hand remained aloft, guiding its flight. The chakran zoomed across the chamber, its light intensifying as it flew, its diameter increasing.

It was over three feet wide by the time it landed across her enemy's shoulders. A blue and radiant hoop, a circle of smoke drifting up around it. There came the sharp odour of burning cloth. The beast shrugged at it, confused, trying to shake it off. Kyna held her hand aloft, her dark eyes drained of emotion. She snatched a fist.

The chakran's blue light intensified. Then, with a sizzling crack, it shrank beyond sight, swallowed by the folds of the beast's cowl.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, the beast's head toppled from its shoulders, bouncing across the ancient floor. Its body swayed drunkenly and crashed to the stone, sending up a puff of ochre dust, weapons clattering from its fingers.

Kyna held out a hand. The chakran shot back to her grasp in a luminous streak of blue. Her gaze moved to her enemy. Its head had rolled free from its cowl.

Kyna's eyes widened. The beast's head was a nightmarish vision. Its snout was shallow, filled with jagged teeth like tombstones in some derelict graveyard. Its hide was a leathery faded blue, its eyes pupilless and white. Most horrid of all, where a man would have sported hair, thin tentacles exploded from the creature's crown, twitching and spasming as life deserted it. Then Kyna knew.

"The theed," she whispered, a chill running up her spine. Her head snapped toward the chamber entrance. Footsteps echoed from the corridor beyond. The beast's kin had arrived.

Kyna scooped up her staff, slamming it in to the sling on her back. The passage was no longer an option. Just one of these beasts had almost destroyed her.

In her mind's eye she mapped the ruined city around her. She would be deep beneath the plateau now, under a mountain of stone. She recalled what she knew about the Aeletians, the lost architects of this ancient city. *They built their defences against the sky.* Her gaze rolled upward. The chamber's height was unreadable, swallowed in shadows.

The footsteps rang louder. Outside in the corridor, shadows danced upon the flame-lit walls.

Kyna bolted. She flung herself at the chamber wall and began to scale. There were surprisingly few handholds given the wall's age, but she was light and agile, and in a few moments she had climbed beyond the reach of the torch's glow.

She paused in the shadows and looked back down, watching the very ordinary-looking floor slab in the chamber's centre. Her purpose for coming here: the waystone.

At this range, its vibration should have been overwhelming. She closed her eyes, even now, hoping against reason to find a hint of life. She drew a breath... Still nothing. Just like the other stone before it.

She resumed her climb, clawing her way higher, the light of the octagonal chamber growing smaller beneath her. At last her probing fingers discovered a break in the wall's surface, but her hopes that she had reached the chamber's zenith were quickly dashed. It was no more than a stone ledge, perhaps two feet wide, that ringed the shaft's perimeter.

Kyna hoisted herself atop it, easing out a breath as she laid herself flat, pressing her body into the shadows. At the last moment, she remembered to extinguish her chakran.

And not a second too soon. Below, her enemy burst into the chamber, gathering around their fallen kin. Kyna froze. There were five of them, robed, each as large as their fallen brother.

Kyna's heart hammered. Given the protection of the ledge and the surrounding shadows, it was unlikely she would be spotted. She was garbed in standard Alakyte battle wear: a high-necked, crossed-over jacket that hung just below the hips, held closed with a pouch-laden belt; armoured wrist guards that covered from her elbows to the backs of the hands; leggings tucked into boots that were light and flexible. All of it was coloured charcoal, less visible than absolute black. Her dark hair, pulled into a single braid, was virtually black itself.

Kyna wasn't worried they would see her. She was worried they would *know*.

Even now, as they examined their kin, the theed remained silent. But their tentacles writhed about their skulls, languidly, as if floating in water. Probing, examining, questioning. Communicating.

Kyna's heart drummed faster. She dared not move. An icy fear pierced her soul, rising in a crescendo, threatening to overwhelm her. They would sense her. In her mind's eye, she could see the beasts turning, looking up at her, tentacles swirling accusingly. They would kill her, eventually. *Collective Spirit, help me in my hour of need.*

Where had this nightmare come from? Only a few days earlier she had been so sure, so happy. This was to have been the greatest triumph of her young life, a testament to her ability. That for which she had trained so long. A chance to prove to her mother she was no longer a child. She would finally earn the respect, perhaps even the acceptance, of her peers.

This Kyna had expected boldly, as sure as the sun would rise each day. That was what they had *all* expected. Yet it had taken less than a fortnight for it all to turn so horribly wrong.

As she waited there in the darkness, hardly daring to breathe, Kyna forced her mind away from the present, lest her thoughts give away her location. She turned her mind back to the one place she knew would absorb her thoughts completely, to the day this nightmare had started. Just twelve days ago.

It had been a warm day when Kyna first entered the plateau. The sun had smiled down from above, dancing along the pearly canyon walls, making them seem like they shone with some mystical inner light. Kyna had been at peace as she rode, her hips

swaying in the saddle with the rhythmic saunter of her mount, her bantak.

"B'orr, b'orr," the bantak offered in a voice that sounded almost human.

"Yes, Vida," Kyna agreed, scratching the matt of hair between the bantak's shoulder scales as her gaze roamed the canyon. "It is beautiful."

The smooth, milky walls of the canyon towered close on either side. Above, the sky was a clear, fierce blue. Illic vines snaked their way up the off-white stone in rivulets of green. The white sandy floor looked inviting and cool. A beautiful scene indeed.

Kyna was surprised to find herself thinking such things. She had never been much enamoured with nature. She found it silly the way some girls wore flowers. But this setting was more to her liking: bold, austere.

The Stone of Ardan, the largest rock on all of Oberyon, stretching from the Steaming Swamps of Madlereen to the Ka-Zahedan Mountains. A shattered stone, dissected by a labyrinth of fissures and canyons. It was said that, if you knew the right path, you could cross the entire plateau without ever leaving the ground. Kyna smiled; that wasn't exactly true. Even the shortest route would force a climb in three or four places. She had committed every one of Ardan's paths to memory, even though her mission covered barely half that area.

Kyna brought her mount to a halt. She closed her eyes and reached out with her senses. In a few seconds she distinguished the unique life-force of the waystone. And, although she did not

recognise it at the time, that was the moment the first wisps of anxiety crept into her heart.

Kyna frowned. She went over the calculations, shook her head, and counted again. The waystone was only a short distance away, but its vibration felt diluted, distant. She wondered if the maps at the Sanctuary could be wrong. Or perhaps the waystones in the outside world were simply weaker than the one on their island. She couldn't imagine her masters omitting such a fact from her training. Kyna patted the bantak's neck and continued along the canyon.

It was late afternoon by the time she reached her destination. The canyon opened into a small and rounded valley, a stone clearing within the great rock. In the centre was a lake of startling blue, flawlessly mirroring the white valley walls. It seemed that if you stepped into its waters you would tumble into the sky. A small cave was nestled on the lake's far bank, its rocky outcrop extending over the water like an awkward pier.

Next to this was the thing that Kyna sought. A stone that looked no different from any other, maybe two feet high, with the contour of a misshapen dome. Its colour was the same milky white as the rocks around it. Indeed, it was for all its ordinariness that this stone had been selected.

But to Kyna it represented something far deeper. This was her future, her life's purpose: a waystone. Just as her briefing had described. Her heart raced in anticipation.

She swung out of the saddle, walked around to the far bank and immediately set about making camp. She didn't want to go about the task with the giddy after effects of magic. Her gaze

flashed repeatedly to the waystone as she worked, her excitement building.

By the time her camp was set, the whispers of twilight were growing about her. The silver moon – tonight, a perfect circle – was just beginning its nightly trek, fading into existence above the plateau wall. On the other side of the heavens, the pale blue moon was a shallow crescent, lending the scene a mystical quality. Kyna looked out over the lake and inhaled deeply, savouring the moment, wanting to remember every detail.

Her shoulders were straight as she walked to the waystone. She squatted and inspected its surface. Even at this close range, its vibration seemed weak. Frowning, she rose and closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Her senses probed the valley before her, finding her place within it, centring the valley within the plateau and out into the world beyond.

Kyna lifted her arms. She felt the currents of force and power coursing around her, becoming one with the flow of their movement. She felt those forces settle, blending into a subtle harmony of light and motion.

Then all was still. At last, she was ready.

Collective Spirit. May your light flow into me, through me, and out into the world beyond.

Kyna started. The magic began.

CHAPTER FIVE

“ATLA. LEUMNOS. SANCTUM.”

Kyna’s voice was hollow as she called forth the power, engaging the drawing process. Her arms moved in arcs, palms open, inducing the energies. Her heart quickened in anticipation of the magic that would follow.

Nothing happened.

Without opening her eyes, Kyna frowned. The waystone did not feel as it should. Its vibration was thick, sluggish. Almost like an ordinary stone. She continued to breathe deeply, evenly, feeling the energies, and said the words again. Still no magic came forth.

Kyna eased out her breath. Casting aside her anxieties, she remembered the feeling of peace, and let that peace wash over her, filling her body. She drew in her breath, and started over.

“Atla. Leumnos. Sanctum.”

Nothing.

Kyna’s eyes snapped open. The waystone was as dull as the rocks around it. She shut her eyes and repeated the ritual.

“Atla. Leumnos.” Her movements became more forceful, almost panicked. Her breaths came quicker.

“Sanctum.”

Nothing.

She stopped and opened her eyes, panic swelling within her. Something was wrong; she had performed this magic a thousand times.

Her mind raced, seeking explanations, examining the implications of each. But she needed to be sure. Kyna began an enchantment of a different variety. She held her hands palm down above the stone: a simple cantrip to test her own power. Almost instantly, the waystone glowed.

Kyna's anxiety deepened. *Her* power was working perfectly. She must have erred in the ritual. If not, the implications were unspeakable. If this waystone was dormant, the entire line along the plateau would dissolve. The stream would become a dead cell, a cancer within the ancient magic of the Saelydion. It was a horrific thought, inconceivable. No, the fault had to lie with her.

Kyna closed her eyes once more. She drew a deep and determined breath, and started over. Again and again she performed the ritual, yet every time it was the same. Nothing.

The night was almost spent by the time she conceded. Her heart was heavy as she crawled, exhausted, into her bedroll. She had failed more miserably than she could ever have imagined. In the history of her order, she could recall no similar tale. Her mother would be furious. Such a routine task...

Kyna had been the youngest Alakyte to have ever passed The Trials. She was the first in her class to be awarded active service. With this failure, it was likely to be years before she was given the chance again. Her mind churned. By the time sleep finally claimed her, dawn's purple hue was brushing the horizon.

She rose the next day and started over. Nothing.

The day after that was the same.

By the fourth day Kyna was simply angry. She had been the most dedicated of students. No-one had worked as hard as she. Let it be Esna, or the dim-minded Zeyk, who failed.

Kyna could not. Would not. *Collective Spirit, help me in my hour of need.*

She took a breath and started over. Nothing.

On the sixth day inspiration visited. It struck so suddenly, so forcefully, that Kyna almost laughed aloud. It came only when she finally accepted the fact that she was not to blame. In the end, she could not ignore the simple logic of it.

The waystone was dead.

If not already, then soon. The Saelydion was failing, this strand of it at least. But if that was true, then how? Was it possible that the Kah Brotherhood had at last found a weapon against them?

For ten thousand years, Kyna's people had walked the strands of the Saelydion, energising its waystones, preserving its ancient magic. It was the most sacred duty of every Alakyte, the very purpose of their order. If something had happened to the Saelydion, the consequences would be catastrophic. Not just for the Alakyte, but for every being on this planet. Darkness would cover this world once more.

That was when the monolith had first popped into Kyna's mind. It was less than fifty miles away... Could something have

happened to it? Something that, in turn, damaged the adjacent waystones? Should she investigate? Kyna was closer than any.

Perhaps she had not failed at all. Perhaps she had been chosen. Chosen by the Collective Spirit to discover the threat, to be the one to alert her order. But what if she was wrong? To fail an initialisation was one thing, but to compound that failure by disobeying orders was unforgivable.

Kyna needed to be sure, she needed to know how far the corruption reached. Too much time had been wasted already. She would go to the next waystone and investigate. Decide there.

So, at dawn on the seventh day, Kyna left that valley with its tranquil lake. She pushed her mount hard, riding with a need to prove herself, riding to outrun her failure. The next waystone was not far away, in the ruins of Cylith-Eron.

But upon her arrival, Kyna had discovered this waystone had also expired.

Her thoughts came back to the present in a disorientated rush. The second waystone, the one she had raced to within the ruins of Cylith-Eron, was the same waystone she looked upon now, from a shadowed ledge high above an octagonal chamber. A chamber where only minutes earlier Kyna had taken her first life.

A theed.

Even now, its tentacles twitched as the last currents of life ebbed away. The beast's kin surrounded the fallen, looking down at the corpse in unnatural silence, their own tentacles, fluid and alive, probing the air.

Then one of the beasts threw its head back and wailed. It was a piercing note, painfully high-pitched, something between howl and

whistle. Yet as alien as it was, its meaning was clear. It was an alarm, an accusation.

Murder.

The sound was immediately answered. Horns blasted from somewhere in the valley outside. One at first, quickly joined by many others. Kyna paled. There had to be hundreds of them. And now they knew an enemy was amongst them.

The beasts below suddenly charged out of the chamber. Kyna didn't pause to consider her fortune. She walked her palms backward along the ledge, pushing herself up onto her haunches, and rose. Then she started climbing. The height of the shaft astounded her. Before long, she left the light of the octagonal chamber behind. Darkness swallowed her completely. She touched one of the dormant rings on her belt. The chakran emitted a soft blue glow. Kyna continued climbing.

From all about came the howl of battle horns, shouts, and the trample of steps. Arms aching in protest, she kept climbing, clawing her way higher one handhold at a time. She was beginning to think she might have to climb back down when she saw it: an opening on the far wall of the chamber and a passageway beyond. Twelve feet, and a drop of a hundred, separated her from her goal.

Kyna climbed a little higher. She glanced over her shoulder at the passage, gauging her trajectory. Satisfied, she shuffled her feet up the wall, coiling her body into a tight ball. She held that pose for a moment, letting the energy build in her limbs. Then she kicked off, springing across the chamber and through the tiny opening like a well-aimed arrow.

Rough stone slammed into her back. Her staff pressed painfully against her as she slid and scraped to a halt. She found herself looking up at the roof of a new passage. Horns blasted from every direction. A hundred proclamations of doom. Instantly, she was on her feet.

Kyna bolted. Wall torches whipped by in a steady strobe of flames. The ochre-bricked passage was unbending, deserted. She reached a junction and jerked back at the sound of footsteps, flattening her body into the shadows as a dozen theed charged along the tunnel she had almost stepped into. They came within feet of her. Kyna caught their animal stench. She slowed her breaths and willed her body to be still, her mind to be silent.

She slunk around the corner as soon as they had passed, heading in the opposite direction. She had no way of knowing if another group would follow the first. She reached out with her senses. The corridor seemed clear. For now. Kyna broke into a run.

Another junction, a hurtling left turn. Her heart leapt. She recognised this passage. It was the same one she had used to enter the city. It would lead her to open air, to the roof of the great plateau. The exit was only a few yards ahead.

Kyna slowed, moving stealthily along the corridor. Ahead, she could see the passage mouth and a deep purple night beyond. The stars were stark and lucid; she must have been underground for hours.

A few feet outside, a cliff dropped away to the part of the city that lay in the crack of the plateau. Kyna had tethered her bantak just outside the passage mouth. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Something was moving in the shadows outside. A theed, guarding the threshold. *Vida*. Her mount had been discovered. The enemy was waiting. Kyna knew then her plight was hopeless. She could never escape the beasts on foot. A bolt of panic raced through her. Too late, she tried to smother it.

Outside, the theed's tentacles twitched. It spun toward her and hissed. The beast charged.

Kyna ran to meet it. Her hand moved in a blur. There was a flash of blue and her chakran was in the air. It expanded before her as she ran, solidifying, taking the shape of a disc, a radiant blue shield. With a flick of her hand, she brought up its twin, hovering it in front of the first. The energies between the two chakrin sizzled, struggling to be free of each other like shackled burveeg. Only Kyna's will held them together.

Her enemy was bearing down on her. Its blade rose for the kill. Kyna let the chakrin's energies build a moment longer. Then, with a boom of power, she released her hold.

The chakran exploded along the passage away from its twin, blasting the beast from the tunnel mouth like a circus cannon. For a moment its massive form hung in the air, a deeper silhouette against the stars. Then it plummeted over the cliff to the ruined city below.

Kyna darted over the threshold, out into the crisp night and the white plateau roof. She paused as the two shrinking chakrin flashed back to her outstretched hand, clipping them to her belt. She crossed to the cliff edge and squinted into the gloom.

Below, the ruins of Cylith-Eron sprawled across the rocky valley, a chaos of crumbling stone. The sight that greeted her froze her blood: theed. Thousands of them, smothering the city. A

constant and chaotic rush, like an agitated hive. Horns raged. Piercing, wailing screeches. It was hideous, hopeless. Kyna's heart pounded in her chest. Her panic grew and grew, building into a bright crescendo of fear that lanced her very soul.

As one, the theed sensed it. The hive's movement froze. A thousand tentacled heads snapped in Kyna's direction.

They howled and came at her.

The theed charged along the paths that climbed the cliff face. They scaled the rock with bare hands. Some disappeared into tunnels. Others scrambled hungrily over the heads of their fellows.

Kyna turned and sprinted. Ahead, the lonely expanse of the plateau roof rolled away in an endless sea. Smoky white stone under a black night and stars. Her head snapped from side to side as she ran, searching. Her bantak was gone. She put her fingers to her lips and whistled. There was no sign of the animal.

The theed were gushing out of the tunnel onto the plateau roof behind her. A mob from below reached the top of the cliff. The two groups merged into one frenzied pack. More than a hundred chased her, slavering, snarling.

Kyna willed her legs to move faster. She raised her fingers, tried to whistle. The ground bumped beneath her, the note caught in her throat. She shook her head, tried again.

Above, the solitary blue moon held her in its pitiless gaze. Something whistled past her ear and clanked to the stone. She eyed it briefly as she sprinted by. It was like a windmill head, flat and two feet wide. A killing thing, made of blades. She risked a glance over her shoulder.

The beasts were at her heels. A shadow was looming over her, bearing down. She tensed, ready for the attack. Then the shadow was upon her.

Kyna spun and almost laughed with relief. Without hesitation she snatched the bantak's scaled neck and hauled herself into the saddle.

"Good girl, Vida," Kyna breathed, as another blade-wheel fired past her head. But Kyna was already away. Few things on Oberyon could outrun a bantak.

Behind her, the beasts dwindled to a halt, watching their quarry tear away into the night, a cloud of white dust billowing in her wake.

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