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THE BATTLE FOR SHAL GARA

There exist in the forest seeds that do not take root unless scorched by fire.
OLD SWATHE PROVERB

‘What in the Six Hells do I see before me?’ Eztaral thundered. The eagleborn snatched a second sword from a nearby warrior. She pointed her blades at Serisi and I, not Haidak. ‘And what could you possibly be grinning at, Tarkosi? How did you get out of your cell?’

‘I caught him fleeing in the loam, Eztaral. With this demon of his!’ Haidak bellowed, trying to claim the stage as quickly as possible.

‘Haidak is Fireborn!’ I blurted over him. ‘His disciples threw me from Shal Gara, took me in front of the demon king, and Haidak stood right beside him the entire time.’

Haidak was a practised liar, I could see that now. He spluttered expertly as he struggled to his feet. He showed just the right amount of injured defiance. Blood leaked down his front and from his thigh. With hands empty and innocent, he surveyed his audience. I saw now that the Envoy Okarin stood behind Eztaral, deep in a thicket of highwarders and with an entourage of sages staring over their shoulders.

‘That is preposterous!’ Haidak countered. ‘How could that be? Those Fireborn wretches attacked me right alongside you, Eztaral. They attacked my own father, curse it!’

‘All orchestrated by you!’ I yelled.

‘Silence!’ Eztaral shouted. ‘Will somebody please, for the love of all the gods, explain why there is a demon standing on my branch!’

‘That is Serisi. My demon.’

‘I am not *your* demon, Tarko,’ she hissed, startling the crowd. The rest looked ready to get busy with their spears.

Eztaral looked between us. ‘*Your* demon. But she’s—’

‘Not within me, thanks to the demon king’s magic. And if you can think up a better explanation I’m ready to hear it. Faraganthar sentenced us both to death in the wildfire, and when we escaped, Haidak here tried to finish the job.’

‘He is a fine liar, isn’t he just?’ yelled Haidak. ‘Where is your proof, traitor?’

‘You’re still wearing your Fireborn gloves, for a start.’

Everybody’s eyes, including Haidak’s, moved to his wormsilk gloves of midnight black. They were the usual apparel of an eagleborn, but instead something we had seen on Fireborn hands far too many times.

Serisi grinned wise.

Stowing a sword point-first in the wooden deck, Eztaral seized Haidak’s wrist. ‘I have seen these before.’

Haidak tried to appeal to his father, still swallowed by the sidelines alongside the envoy. ‘Father! Sage! Tell them the truth. Tell them I am no traitor like this Terelta.’

Kol Baran pushed between the highwarders to come stare at his son. I saw the quiver on the man’s lip. The beads of sweat on the sage’s forehead shone as brightly as the scarlet gems lining his coat. The villain I had seen in him had died, and all the hatred I’d held for him was bequeathed to his son.

The sage shook his head. ‘You are no son of mine.’

Haidak moved quickly, striking Eztaral across the face and giving himself space to raise his fists.

‘Seize Haidak Baran!’ came the orders, but Haidak was already running for the edge of the branch with Serisi close on his tail.

‘You idiots!’ he screamed in wild laughter. ‘You’re all dead and ash and have yet to realise it! We will meet again, and when we do, you will be kneeling in the dust with my victorious foot on your necks!’

‘Shoot him, curse you!’

The traitorous Baran whistled to his lancewing in the same breath as his hateful words. The great bird sent warriors flying as it once again came to the aid of its master. Serisi’s claws came within inches of Haidak’s neck before he was dragged into the sky. Hesitant arrows chased him but none came close.

The crowds were full of shock and confusion. Handfuls of lancers pulled off their helmets and slammed them on the wood in anger. The spirit of Shal Gara wavered in the face of yet more treachery. I could smell the stink of fear as clearly as the encroaching sulphur.

‘SILENCE! All of you!’ Eztaral’s attention had turned back to me. She studied me head to toe before meeting my weary gaze. There was a smear of blood beneath her nose.

‘I—’

Eztaral put a sword in my face to remind me I wasn't off the hook. 'If you dare say I told you so, I will gut you right here in front of all these people, and not one of them will ever bat an eyelid for fear of me doing it to them also.'

'I'm sorry, 'I said instead, and raised my voice so all could hear. 'I'm sorry I betrayed your trust. What I did was all for the good of Shal Gara. We can argue about it all you want later, but for now, I need to tell you Faraganthar is coming.'

'The demon king is already here, boy! If you've come to warn us, you're far too late.'

'We have come to kill him, 'added Serisi.

Eztaral was still having a hard time avoiding staring at her. 'And why should I believe a single word that comes out of those jaws? You, of all... beasts.'

'Not least because it's the truth, but because if we fail, the entire Swathe will fall, not just Shal Gara,' I answered. 'I don't care about making up for what I've done. I don't care about forgiveness, I only care about our survival.'

Serisi grunted in agreement. 'Once my father has his claws on the nectra in this tree, he will have all the power he needs to summon our god to your world. All of you, from beast to child, will know chaos. The Iron Icon will not rest until everything is destroyed as our world was.'

'I believe Tarko, 'Pel called out. He too emerged from the warriors. The old man looked haggard, and Atalawe held him up by his arm, but the shine in his eyes was stronger than ever.

'Stand aside!'

The shout came from behind us. Shrugging aside the muscle of her highwarders, the Envoy Okarin emerged into our circle. Without a word, she came to examine Serisi. The demon was half her height taller. I could feel the heat emanating from her, but Okarin was fearless. She stood close to Serisi, neck craned, hands clasped before her.

'I have seen you in my dreams, but I thought you an enemy until now,' Okarin said.

Smoke curled from the edges of Serisi's jaws. 'Perhaps I still am, but enemies may be united against common struggle. I will not allow my father to let your world die as he did the Starless Plains. This forest has shown me different.'

'As have I, not that she will admit it,' I muttered.

'Nor should she.' The envoy turned to me. With her strings of beads tight around her hands, she approached me. 'And you, Tarkosi Terelta, what is different about you?'

Eztaral spat blood on the deck before I could answer. 'We have little time for this, Envoy! We should prepare for battle,' she growled. 'All of you! Get moving! Second-born and sorcerers to your branches and ranks!'

'We will need more than that to win,' Serisi snarled to me. I nodded, recognising the same fire in her eyes as built within me.

'It was thinking the very same,' I agreed. 'Envoy, Eztaral, Sages, listen to me. If we have a hope of stopping the demon king, everybody needs to fight. Not just warrior or sorcerer tribes, but

all of us. Every tribe, everybody that can hold a spear or pull a bowstring. Workers, scholars, healers, heirs. All of us.'

'Those are not the rules of the Bloodlaws!' Sage Wasaqa was the first to complain. Maku shrilly agreed. Sage Dūnekar folded his arms and stared at me. His blue hands twitched as if he was pondering smiting me.

'To the Six Hells with the Bloodlaws!' I yelled to them all. It was a moment I had dreamed of doing in my hovel at night, staring up at the Crimson Crown through dark foliage. I was given no time to drink it in.

'Maven Terelta!' barked Dūnekar. 'You have no right. No authority! Your crimes are still to be judged!'

Serisi took a step towards to the gaggle of sages that made the highwarders raise a small copse of spears. 'Then listen to me.'

Sage Maku spluttered. 'You are of *them*. Demonkind! Why should we listen to a beast like you?'

'Because she knows what's coming,' I shouted. 'And none of us do. I've only seen it in dreams and even that chilled me to my core. The demon king is mad with vengeance and rage. He sentenced his own daughter to death for daring to oppose him and speak sense.'

'He has sworn an oath to chaos itself. He will stop at nothing to do what he was commanded by the Iron Icon. I see that now.'

'Which means neither should we. The Bloodlaws don't unite us in order, they divide us. They keep us apart. We need to be united if we have even a hope of winning. All of our victories have been luck so far.'

'And you, Tarko.' Atalawe stood close. Her face was as serious as I'd ever seen it. She was already trying to examine my wounds.

Okarin shook her head, somehow already aware of my loss of magic. 'And yet Tarko is no longer the same Tarko,' she breathed.

'No,' I seethed. 'It has been Serisi this entire time, not me. She was the power within me.'

Dūnekar's impassive face cracked then, of all times. A rare smirk hovered near the corner of his hoggish snout. 'It all becomes clear.'

I scowled. 'I'm still a sorcer. Give me some nectra and it'll be much clearer for you, Sage.'

'No, Tarko.' Atalawe pointed to the black veins across my neck and now left shoulder. 'If Serisi's presence was giving you power, the seedwitch in me thinks she was also keeping the nectra's poison at bay. You drink nectra, lad, and you might kill yourself right there on the spot.'

'I need my magic. *We* need my magic. I don't have a choice.'

Atalawe gripped me sternly by the shoulder and I winced. The pain crept through my chest. It was impossible to ignore: I did feel poisoned. It wasn't merely the scalds from the wildfire, but something deeper.

'Yes, you do,' she said. 'Otherwise you'll be zero use to us.'

I could see the hesitation in their faces; especially the look Eztaral swapped with Okarin and the Jade Wolf. Even the highwarders looked me up and down.

‘In that case,’ I yelled, loud and brashly to hide my own worry. ‘Then get me a bloody sling and some stones, curse it!’ I looked into the envoy’s red eyes and silently begged her to believe me. ‘Unite the tribes, Envoy.’

Okarin took barely any time to ponder. It seemed her mind was already made. ‘You heard him,’ she announced, giving me trust I did not deserve. ‘Put a weapon in any hand that can hold one. Those that can’t fight will help others who can. Those are my decrees and so it shall be!’

‘Envoy, the matriarch will not allow—’

‘The matriarch is my mother, and as such my will is hers! And she will likely thank me if she should see another day, Sage Wasaqa.’ While Okarin spoke, she seized a sword from Eztaral and thrust it into the sage’s hands. ‘Better get to the battlements, Sage.’

I let out the shuddering breath I had been holding within, relieved. To the echo of shouts spreading the decree up and down the bloodwood and across its branches, I turned to the Scions at my side. Only Pel wore what could be considered a smile, and even that was chased away by Eztaral’s growling. The eagleborn was thumbing the edge of her sword.

‘I don’t like any of this. Not a demon in my tree. Not thousands of untrained bodies in the middle of battle. Not the lack of your magic nor your lies, Tarko, but war is rarely ever fair. I will take what I can get,’ said Eztaral. ‘You. Demon.’

‘I am Serisi,’ she replied.

‘I don’t care what your name is. You even think about betraying me, and I will have your fiery guts for candlevines.’

‘You can relax, worm. I am here for my father.’

‘Worm?’ Eztaral hissed.

‘You get used to being called that,’ I said, before taking a moment to sigh. ‘I truly am sorry, Eztaral. I’m sorry to you all. I’m sorry for the doubt I’ve caused you and for letting down the Scions.’

‘So you should be, and stow the apologies. You and your demon get us through today, and I’ll begin to think about forgiving you.’

‘Fair enough,’ I whispered. To my side, Pel’s impassive face betrayed a wink.

Eztaral pinched the bridge of her nose. She began to speak, almost a whisper at first until we Scions recognised the words. Pel’s voice joined her. Then Atalawe’s. Even Redeye, sour of face and so-far silent, recited them with us. I lent my voice to the chorus until we Scions practically shouted the words.

‘What is darker than night may never grasp the light. When Swathe’s days grow dire, we will stand against the fire. Where others will fall, the Scions refuse to falter. To Kī Raxa, the Three, and the spirits, we make and keep this vow!’

‘Never before have those words rang so true,’ Eztaral uttered. ‘Don’t you dare disappoint me today of all days, Scions!’

Our fists met in the middle of our circle. Serisi, not knowing what to do, followed our gesture. Her hand of charcoal hide and silver iron knocked against ours. Eztaral stared at her, and Serisi right back.

‘Three Gods, save us,’ the eagleborn muttered before sweeping away into the maelstrom of people.

Serisi and I were left together for a brief moment. She shrugged at me. ‘That went well, all things considered.’

I found myself laughing with a manic and nervous abandon as I ran after the Scions.



Shal Gara knew chaos without the demons laying a claw on our bark. The abandoning of the Bloodlaws, however temporary, sowed confusion and fear across the ranks at first. The prospect of being a warrior divided the citizens of Shal Gara. Workers young and old leapt forwards to claim their weapons from the piles and armouries. Scholars and healers were more reticent. They took their spears and swords with shaking hands, very aware the only thing they had ever fought was either dust or foot-rot. Fighting demons was a giant step up.

Serisi led her own trail of panic. No matter how many warriors surrounded us in our march to the lower branches and battle, the sight of the demon in our midst still brought shouts and cries. Pel and Atalawe quelled those who had anger to work out on demon-hide, constantly shouting for people to get back. Serisi leered at them all, jaws wide and eyes burning, fierce in her pride. Here was a creature who knew what she was, and did not know the meaning of shame or insult.

As for me, without my magic, I did not feel the hero I was once. The fear beat in me ferociously. I hadn’t felt such a novice since my first battle. Even the sling in my hand and the barrel of stones next to me did nothing to reassure me. I distracted myself by trying to find my mother, sister, or Ralish, in the crowds.

I didn’t know if Serisi’s mind was still linked to mine, but she looked at me as if she still heard my thoughts. ‘You are more than simply a wizard, Tarko. If I have learned one truth about you, it is that.’

The demon’s encouragement steeled me enough for me to spin my sling, take aim, and unleash. I didn’t see where it landed, but the effort was enough to help me put aside the worry. She was right: I was more than a sorcerer or a worker. I was a liar, and a traitor in some eyes, but ever since I could remember, I had been a fighter. I had never given up, and I refused to now.

When we came to the battlements of a branch low to the Neathering, we stared out across the horde that swarmed towards the tree. The veritable sea of grey-skinned navik, each holding a

flaming torch, punctuated by pyres of demonkind, would have shamed the stars Shal Gara missed so dearly.

The defences were already letting loose wave after wave of arrows and stones and spears, but the horde kept coming at us. The fierce outrage of the demon king drove them almost senselessly onwards. Even when the big bows bucked on their mounts, laying low demons here and there, the horde did not flinch. Their war-cries were constant and unabated in their approach. I looked from east to west, and saw the fire filling every inch of my vision.

‘Three Gods,’ I breathed.

‘Your gods will not help you now,’ Serisi growled.

Like everybody apart from me, Eztaral still kept a wary distance from Serisi. ‘You, demon! What can you tell us?’

‘To fight.’

‘How helpful. No tactics or anything useful?’

‘I could only see my father’s intentions in Tarko’s dreams. He is not the only one who lost a power when we were separated.’

Eztaral worked her jaws, likely sifting the curses from her chosen words. ‘How very convenient. Wonderful.’

Serisi grasped the wooden battlements and left char beneath her fingers. ‘My father will come as a flood of fire. He will sacrifice all and any to fulfil his promise to chaos. Your water slows us, but it will not stop us. Least of all the navik that are slave to my father’s mind.’

‘To further complicate our defences, Shal Gara has slowed down,’ Atalawe said. ‘We caught Fireborn dragging chains and anchors from the Rootfort.’

I nodded. ‘They were the same Fireborn that threw me to the loam. Juraxi led them.’

‘Juraxi?’ Atalawe blurted. ‘That useless lump from the forest?’

‘The same one I stationed at the Den?’

‘The very same,’ I told Eztaral.

‘Three Gods and all their spirits!’ she barked. ‘If I ever see Juraxi or Haidak again, I’ll skin them alive.’

‘You’ll have to get in line,’ came my snarl of a reply.

A wailing emerged from the branches beside and below us. ‘Fire!’

Fire spells arose from the demon’s horde. I lifted my hands in habit once more, and for a blessed moment I thought my magic had returned until I realised it was Redeye next to me. He spared a brief glance for me before I reloaded my sling.

Faraganthar’s horde came faster than before. Whether it was due to the slowing of Shal Gara or my imagination, they broke like a wave on the roots. Navik died by the hundreds under the crush. The demons’ tactics were wiser; they pincer around the trunk while their wizards kept us occupied. For an hour, we fought them back and kept them at bay, but one by one, inexorably, demons and navik climbed over their corpses to lay hand on the bloodwood. Big bows and spears

rained slaughter on those that took hold. My own slingstones knocked navik after navik from the city's roots.

I thought we had the upper hand until Pel put down his bow to seize me by the shoulder. He pushed a sword against me and tied its scabbard to my belt.

'For your protection, 'was all he said, and no sooner had he spoken did the drums above take on a more frantic beat. A concerted and barrage of fire spells took every sorcer's focus to repel, and even then a dozen fell upon Shal Gara. Serisi saved a whole stretch of ranks by meeting one head on with her claws intertwined. The fire spread around her, foiling the spell's explosion, but lacking none of the heat. I crouched alongside the Scions as we shielded ourselves. Atalawe caught a burn across her face before the fire died. As Serisi glowed with whatever power she'd absorbed from the flames, I couldn't help but stare at Redeye's vials of nectra hanging across his body.

'Don't even think about it! 'was all he could say between the effort of his spells. 'You heard my sister's warning.'

Serisi took the sorcer's side. 'I didn't risk my skin for you to go ahead and kill yourself, Tarko.'

Another wave of fire fell, and I watched a whole section of branch above me explode as their sorcers failed to hold back the onslaught.

Eztaral now wore a shield on her left arm, and stood tall on an abutment of branch that rose above the fortifications, baying her orders at higher ranks. Two flaming arrows sought to end her, but she caught them both on her shield without so much as a blink. She hacked them to stumps with the blade of her sword. 'Hold true!' came her resounding cry.

I darted above the battlement to unleash another stone, and as I did, I saw a spearhead of navik pressing towards the tree. They carted chains with them, ones with grapples and hooks.

'Eztaral!' I called. 'They're up to something down there!'

My warning was overridden by Ravenborn Gaakaran yelling to us. 'Kraid! They're breaching the Rootfort! They're firing ropes and chains above the roots from too many angles to hold them off. The sorcers are too few and being overwhelmed. We need the boy and that demon down there!'

The blistering heat ran through my face. Sparing a glance for me, Eztaral's order was immediate, and we obeyed just as swiftly. 'Scions, with me!'

Our mad dash down the final branches to the Neathering was punctuated by falling debris and flames trying to take root on Shal Gara. The workers and now scarce water sorcers worked frantically to keep the fires under control. Smoke became intolerably thick. Blinding arrows streaked overhead. Here and there, navik fell like rotten fruit.

Eztaral sliced the head from one that landed in a half-dead heap between us. Serisi went one further and threw the creature's corpse back over the nearest parapet.

'Never liked these foul beasts!' she snarled.

The Rootfort barricade dripped with every barrel of water Shal Gara still had to offer. The broken fort had been carved up and nailed shut. Where the path had once led down into the fort, a solid wall now stood alone between Shal Gara and the demons.

Within the Neathering, as flames fell outside its walls and warrenous walkways, the finest sorcers and warriors – and the bravest and maddest of the other tribes – stood in a thick press. It was impressive how the tightly packed crowd somehow found room to let the demon through. Once again Pel and Eztaral had to call for calm.

Every soul fell silent and pensive. Bows, spears, slingstones and spells were trained on the thick barricade that now shook constantly. The rumbling of Shal Gara's roots were already loud enough, but this was a different clamour, growing noisier by the moment. One of claws and flames and jaws gnawing to get to us. Smoke eked through the seams of the reinforced wood.

Eztaral was calling encouragement over the gathered heads. She needed no threats to inspire the fighters. Everybody had already figured this battle was one to the death. 'This is it, Shal Gara! This is where we make our stand. Fight for your lives and those of your bloodwood! There are no tribes that separate us today. We are all human fighting against one enemy. We stand for the Swathe! Show these demons the true meaning of hell!'

The hammering grew ever louder and bestial until the splinters showed. The tips of black blades emerged from cracks. Something repeatedly thundered against the door in measured slams.

Serisi stepped beyond the semicircle of weapons and summoned another blade of fire to her hands.

'Get back, demon!' came the order, but Serisi ignored Eztaral. She simply held her sword tall and ready in both hands.

The door burst asunder moments later, carved into three pieces by a flat and snarling face wrought from iron. It was a hammer, broader than I was wide and tall, and it sent the pieces of door crashing into the ranks. A splinter cut my forehead open before I ducked.

Serisi stood fast. As the debris streamed around her, she fixed her eyes on the first demon to emerge: a brute with the giant hammer in his swollen hands. With an ululating roar, he charged. Serisi let his hammer fall at her feet before she used the handle for a step and jumped onto the demon's shoulders. Her blade pieced his face, and like his hammer, the deck broke beneath his back.

'Loose!'

A storm of arrows kept the demons and their navik in the doorway of the barricade. Dead smoking flesh began to pile up as a second blockade. Sorcers sent a whirlwind of spells until mud and a vicious wind pressed against the fist of demons seeking to punch their way into our city.

My sling never stopped spinning. Skulls cracked and bones broke before my efforts. I counted a dozen dead before the fire filled the barricade. Serisi had hacked ceaselessly at her kin with her sword. Even she had to fall back, jaws bared in the flames.

'Sorcers!' yelled Eztaral. 'And Pel! It's now or never!'

As burning with jealousy as I was, in the maelstrom of bodies, I watched Redeye slap nectra into Pel's hand.

'It's time, Pel!' The old man took a heartbeat to stare blindly at the vial before Redeye thumped him on the back. I watched as the old sorcer threw his doubts to the wind and threw the shining liquid back. The magic arched his spine, and when he opened his eyes, they shone a brighter blue than any sorcer around us.

Water and dirt exploded from their stores as two concentrated columns of magic ploughed into the demons. Steam exploded with their roars. Dust billowed before Redeye refocused it back into the fray. A terrible shaking rattled the deck from beneath my feet. Even Serisi fell back, jaws gaping like a blast furnace. The two opposing spells grew in size and intensity until warriors were forced to retreat. The Neathering shuddered like a creature in its death-throes around us.

Pel and Redeye's mouths were open in shouts of effort I couldn't hear though they stood a dozen feet from me. Pel's hands flowed with the magic. The water flowing around him shaped into tendrils that stabbed into the door. I watched, in awe at the old man's power over his spells. Other sorcers formed a bulwark of magic around them.

They fought three steps before the barricade broke wider. All the elements the sorcers had at their disposal, and their strength still failed in the face of fire. Jets of flame shot in all directions to blast holes in the Neathering. Steam blinded and scalded those who were caught too close.

And through it all, I wondered if I would have made a difference. The way that she and I and a dozen warriors were thrown back into the pressed ranks, I doubted it.

To the screams of a man beside me who had fallen on a spear, I scrambled to get upright. Serisi's claws grazed my back again. I felt myself dropped on my feet and pushed along by a current I couldn't fight.

Demons burst through the barricade, laying waste to those that couldn't get out of the way fast enough. Our dense numbers became our undoing as the demons hacked at anything that moved, even their own navik. Slaughter reigned in the Neathering before the survivors managed to fall back. Just as I hauled myself and anyone else I could out of the maelstrom of bodies and blood, the barricade fell to pieces. The shockwave knocked everything upright flat, myself included. I looked around in the confusion to see I was sprawled alongside my demon.

'My father himself has arrived!'

At last, Faraganthar had laid foot on Shal Gara. The very presence of the demon king seemed to turn the tide. The way he towered over his kin, or the two swords flaming in his hands, or the crown of flames that burned in his wake, was enough to stutter the hearts of every uninitiated. Dozens turned tail and run for higher levels. They were not alone: I scrambled backwards until I found my feet. But I did not run. Neither did Serisi. She and her father had locked eyes. The fire between his black jaws and streaming from his shoulders turned a fierce white-gold in surprise and rage.

'Serisianathiel!' he thundered. 'You live?'

To the lightning flashes of wizards' spells, I watched Faraganthar sow destruction left, right, and centre. His warriors swarmed behind him, and within moments they had forged a foothold on Shal Gara I could see was impossible to dislodge. Fire followed in his wake. Black smoke billowed in thick clouds from the inside of the Neathering. Even the doused wood of the decks caught flame under the heat of the wildfire.

I heard the pain in Eztaral's voice as she gave her orders to fall back. At first I thought her injured, but it was only her pride. Still within slingshot of the encroaching demons and navik, we fought a running battle to the top of the Neathering. The overcomplicated thoroughfares of the Neathering kept the demons cramped and easy to pour vengeance on, and Shal Gara kept it up as long as possible before the fires burned other paths to the top of the Neathering. For the first time in the war, the big bows turned inwards to keep the demons at bay. With the extra firepower and with swarms of citizens raising arrows and spears against the fiery invaders, the slog of a battle remained a stalemate until Faraganthar once more broke the wall of warriors. Lancers stood their ground in clumps, cutting at demons legs while lancewings ran diving attacks to knock demon after demon from the branches. The king's and wizards' fire forced them back, and between the flames, Faraganthar pointed at his daughter as if she was his prize, not Shal Gara's nectra.

I was working my sling furiously in an attempt to break the king's jaw when I felt hands on my shoulders. Atalawe pulled me after her.

'Serisi! Fall back,' I yelled to the demon, refusing to let her

With some coaxing, Serisi followed us until we had extricated ourselves from the front ranks and stood in the brief calm between falling navik and bloody battle.

'What's the plan, Eztaral?' I asked breathlessly of the circle of Scions. All except Pel, they looked haunted by doubt.

'We keep fighting,' she growled, but I saw the flicker in her eyes.

'My father will not stop until he or I am dead. If I challenge him, I can hold him back long enough for you to set a trap, or leave this tree to save yourselves.'

'We aren't leaving, I can tell you that right now, demon,' Eztaral said with adamance. 'There's no safe way to do so long as Shal Gara moving.'

'Tarko!'

It is a strange skill of the mind to always hear a mother's voice, no matter the clatter of noise, even if it was death and battle. Pushing between the Scions, I saw my mother, Tesq and Ralish bargaining between the crowds in their effort to reach me. A navik fell between us at that exact moment. Sweeping the sword from my belt, I closed the distance to the grotesque, snarling beast and cut an arm. I found mother and Tesq hacking at the navik from its other side. With a squeal, it collapsed to the deck. The Tereltas stared at each other.

'There's a family activity I didn't think we'd be engaging in,' Tesq said as she wiped grey blood from her face.

'There's a lot I need to explain to you,' I gasped, looking between them all, 'but there's no time to explain it. All you have to believe is that I never meant any harm.'

‘I believe you. I raised a good son, and to believe anything else is an insult to me,’ mother scoffed. She was intently watching the demon behind me. ‘So this is the Serisi that stole my son and turned him against his own kind.’

The demon bowed as we humans did. ‘More like the other way around, Axera.’

Ralish wore a furrowed brow. ‘How were you separated?’

‘Her father did it,’ I explained, gesturing to Serisi.

Mother grabbed me by the shoulders. ‘I don’t pretend to understand any of it, and although I’m glad you’re yourself again...’ She touched my neck gingerly. ‘You look like a gloomsprite, Tarko. Sicker than I’ve ever seen you.’

‘I think your mother means to say you look like shit,’ Ralish said. ‘I’m inclined to agree.’

I told myself Ralish was covering her concern. I shook my head. ‘I’m fine. Lacking the power of a demon in my veins, is all,’ I replied.

‘Your magic?’ asked Tesq.

‘Gone, and Atalawe tells me any more nectra will kill me, if I don’t succumb to its poison first. Doomed either way.’

My mother cuffed me across the cheek. ‘Don’t you dare. You haven’t come this far to give up now.’

‘No, I have not,’ I told her firmly, before looking to my sister and Ralish. ‘I haven’t given up fighting yet and I don’t intend to. I’m a Terelta, aren’t I? It’s not in our nature.’

‘You might not have given up, but I believe your tree has,’ Serisi growled from behind me.

‘What?’ Eztaral and I echoed each other.

I was already moving to the nearest edge. The others raced me there, and beyond the wooden battlements, we saw the demons’ sabotage.

Chains and ropes fouled Shal Gara’s roots. For every one the bloodwood shrugged off, two more pierced her bark. Stakes twice the length of me worked as anchors against the bloodwood’s momentum. Flames bombarded the roots until the bark ignited. With an awful groaning and a shudder that shook half of the city to its knees, Shal Gara began to grind to a halt.

‘Six Hells!’ Eztaral cursed.

‘You have your chance at escape after all,’ said Serisi before glancing at me, ‘and I will have my chance to challenge my father.’

‘He’ll kill you!’ I blurted

‘You underestimate me, Tarko.’

‘No, you underestimate us,’ I told her. ‘You have us to face him alongside you.’

The demon blew smoke from her nostrils. ‘That is not the demon way.’

I seized her claw before she could turn, not caring how it burned me. ‘You’re fighting on the side of the worms now, remember? We might not share a body any longer but you’re not alone.’

Serisi stared down at me for a long time before bowing her head. ‘What do you propose?’

Eztaral took charge. ‘A trap. With you as the bait.’

‘With both of us as the bait,’ I interjected.

‘Tarko, without your—’ Mother began but I didn’t want to hear it.

‘We draw Faraganthar where we want him,’ I said. ‘Separated from his horde long enough to—’

‘Spring a trap and kill him.’ Eztaral twirled her sword. ‘Will that keep your horde at bay?’

‘It may,’ Serisi said, shining with flame.

It was the first time in a while I had seen Atalawe grin so broadly. ‘Then it looks like we’re in agreement. We’ll be the subject of songs and stories for seasons to come.’

‘Just as long as we don’t die in the process,’ muttered Redeye, true to form.

Serisi and I held each other’s gazes. *Doomed either way*, I heard the words echo in my head. Not the demon’s, but my own voice, so long drowned out I had almost forgotten it. I did not know if I could fight inevitability, but I would have rather died trying than die succumbing to it. By the glower in the demon’s eyes, Serisi seemed to hear my thoughts. As did my mother. She looked at me as if she read my mind.

‘I want you out of the way, Mother. All three of you,’ I told her.

She pulled a haughty face. ‘Giving me orders now, Maven Terelta?’

I pulled a face. ‘Yes I am. I won’t have you dying for the bloodwood. Get to the western side of the city and away from the battle.’

‘Then you keep your word. I want to see you alive and whole when all this is done. You hear me, Tarko. And you, demon?’

Serisi bowed again in silence.

Eztaral forced the rest of us on as fire rained along the branch we sheltered on. Ralish and I were left with a moment amongst the maelstrom. I was transfixed by her eyes, one half shut in shrewd analysis of me, especially the dark marks along my neck.

‘I thought you were somebody different.’

‘Ralish—’

‘And I was right. I scoffed when you complained about the Bloodlaws yet here I am with a sword in my hand. You might have been a fool, and a liar, maybe even a traitor, but you aren’t ordinary, Tarko.’

‘I’ll try to take that as a compliment.’

‘You should,’ Ralish said before prodding me sharply in the chest. ‘Listen to your mother, Tarko. I’ll be waiting for you.’

The impulse drove me. I didn’t promise her anything, but even as the weakness wracked my body, I put my hand to her neck, pulled her in, and kissed her until the racket of war ripped us apart.

Eztaral’s voice filled our silence. ‘Tarko! Get your arse over here!’

Treading backwards, I watched mother, Tesq, and Ralish escape into the crowds pressing upwards in panic, and wondered without answer whether it would be the last time I saw them.

‘Tarko!’ Pel yelled at me now.

‘Coming, curse you!’



Every branch became a barricade as we lost ground after ground to the demons. The ranks cycled, with others holding desperate shield lines as the exhausted and wounded were dragged backwards to form more ranks. Where obsidian and spells couldn't keep the demons at bay, lancers fought losing but brave battles toe to toe with the flaming enemy. Lancewings continued to bombard the demons. Rocks and barrels of water spewed from branches above in a torrent, but the more demon claws that swarmed up the face of Shal Gara, the more they outflanked us. Every foot of decking they claimed and scorched spurred them on to further bloodlust.

Our plan was executed by the thinnest and most brittle hair. The warriors Eztaral had dragged with us barely kept ahead of the battle. Half the big bows and other machines of war could not be moved fast enough and were turned to splinters as the demons overran them.

Serisi and I dared to stay as close to danger as we could to keep the demons' outrage burning for us. Faraganthar took his murderous pleasure and time climbing Shal Gara. While his vanguard pushed, he set about wielding his fire against the bloodwood. Even then, he still called for his daughter and death upon her traitorous horns. The fact our lure was working was the only encouragement we had.

'You can do this, right, Serisi? You can fight him?'

'I must.'

'Not what I asked.'

'I have a better chance than any of you.'

'Comforting!' I snapped back, before stumbling.

It was then I felt the change in the war-drums that Eztaral had promised us as a signal. Serisi and I began to run as fast as we – or rather, as fast as I could run – up the remaining branches, past the smoking, fire-riddled Midern, and fighting stray navik as we climbed.

A wall of snarling orokan and barkwolves greeted us as we passed the centre of the bloodwood, and collapsed on the sprawling Branch of the Matriarchs. The beasts howled and snuffled at Serisi in a great din of noise, while their wranglers strained to guide them backwards. Above us, lancewings and their lancer riders ran spirals around the tree while they waited to pounce.

I stared across the rest of the sprawling plaza. Atalawe stood above her fellow wranglers with Inwar at her side and greeted me with a conspicuous wave. The rest of the fighters were withdrawing back along the branch and deck to leave a broad space for the demon king and his ilk. I saw tribes of all kinds standing beside each other, warriors alongside, scholars, workers rubbing shoulders with heirs. Pel stood manning a big bow, while Redeye was already standing on a hillock of dirt with every sorcer Shal Gara had left. A pain ran through me as I moved to join them, still guided by habit and longing. Instead, I stood alongside Serisi. The demon was breathing

smoke in deeper heaves than my confidence would have liked. Even so, the fire beneath her hide burned brightly. She raised her fist of metal and flexed the claws she could. I patted the pocket of stones at my hip and slid one into my sling. I clutched it until my knuckles turned pale. We shared one silent glance as the warriors drew back, and the remaining air sorcers made veils from the smoke.

In the vacuum of our trap, the demons climbed branch after branch, destroying whatever buildings took their fancy. As I stared below to the horde now spread beneath the tree, I saw market stalls and wagons hurled into the air. Smoke swirled up the branches, closely followed by the bright shapes of demons thirsty for carnage. Warriors and citizens fled before them. They choked and they cried out as they sprinted past us. The demons were forced into double file by the narrow stairs and leafroad, and as the charge encountered us on the broad and largely empty plaza, they halted for a moment at the sight of Serisi. The demon flushed with fire as she roared.

‘The betrayer!’ one rasped, readying an axe of glowing iron.

As the demons bunched together, ready to strike, Serisi raised her voice. ‘Challenge! I challenge Faraganthar!’

The demons bellowed as one, scattering apart like a seam ripped. Several navik tumbled off the leafroad in the haste to make way for the king. The thunder of Faraganthar’s feet preceded him. Flame billowed as he appeared. His claws raked across the bark of the bloodwood as he approached us.

‘Challenge, you demand? You forget, Serisianathiel, you may have survived my fire, but you are no longer Voidborn enough to challenge me. And to involve the worm is an insult to the very ash of the Starless Plains!’ Faraganthar uttered with abject hatred in his voice. His fiery eyes switched back and forth between the demon and I.

‘And you, Father, are too blinded by greed to be king of this horde!’ replied Serisi.

‘You know nothing of what you speak of. You know nothing of the true face of chaos. Of the great mantle I have been given by our god, nor of the glory we will wreak here today!’ Faraganthar boomed. He took a step towards us and the wood sparked beneath his claws. His gaze drew to the giant doors sitting at the base of the Branch of Matriarchs that guarded Shal Gara’s core. ‘How fitting you make your pathetic stand here, where your nectra lies. I can smell it even now, calling to me.’

If I had honed any skill throughout my life, it was the ability to antagonise everyone I met. I decided to needle him further. Distraction was the name of our game. ‘Why is it you sound afraid, King? Are we too much of a threat to you?’

Faraganthar slammed his star-iron sword into the decking. The shock alone almost knocked me back. ‘Challenge, you say?’ he roared. Smoke expanded from him like the wings of a colossal bat. ‘Your wish of death shall be granted!’

For the demon’s size, Faraganthar moved as quick as a lancewing. Serisi was even faster. She ducked a slice from the sword that would have felled a tree in one blow. I was not so swift, and lacked about half the length of leg the demons did. It took me all my dwindling strength to

leap from the backswing that Faraganthar levelled at me. I rolled nimbly, knocking pain into my head and shoulders, but came up running. The cowardly part of me screamed for me to keep running, but instead I turned and took aim. The flailing limbs of the demons, daughter and father, kept me from loosing my stone.

Serisi looked as though she already had the upper hand already. She evaded every strike, weaved around every brutal thrust, all the while leading Faraganthar deeper into the plaza and even away from the doors of the bloodwood's core. The demons of the horde formed a wall of their own behind their king that crept across the wood like a mould.

A cheer burst from me as Serisi landed the first blow. Her sword clipped Faraganthar's shoulder and fire dribbled like blood from the wound. It was far from fatal, but it was enough to draw a haunting screeching from the crowded demons and navik.

Faraganthar ceased whatever game he had been playing. He feigned with his next cut, catching Serisi in a trap that saw his fist strike her square in the jaw. Claws left glowing lines on her cheek like my own rankings.

The demon king hit her again, and I heard bone or horn crack. Serisi tumbled into a crouch, almost squashing me beneath her. As Faraganthar raised his sword to stab, I took aim once more. The king paused to scorn me and my weapon.

'Your feeble stones will not save you,' he cackled, drawing roars from his demons.

'No, perhaps they won't,' I replied, 'but they hurt like all Six Hells in one.'

No sooner had the words left me did I pour all my effort into my throw and let loose my slingshot over Serisi's shoulders.

The stone made a sound that was heard easily over the fire of battle. Faraganthar's head snapped to the side, his confident smirk now wiped away. The growl that emanated from him I could feel through the deck. Slowly, he turned, and showed us where the stone had chipped his face. Red fire leaked from the hole in his cheek.

I couldn't reload fast enough. Faraganthar pounced, reaching to smite me, but Serisi bought me moments. She sprang into a tackle, seizing her father around the waist while she savaged him with her claws. I slung stone after stone, striking the demon king in the chest twice more before he twisted Serisi aside and sliced his sword across her back. Faraganthar now stood between us. Fire swirled in his empty claws.

'You will burn for your insolence!' he promised me as he grinned, and took a step towards me.

I hit him with one more stone before he closed the gap. Like the worm I was, I threw myself to the ground between his trunk-like legs. Crawling like a navik to get up, I felt the heat on my back as Faraganthar turned. I felt the wind rush past my head.

Clang!

I looked up to find Serisi's sword crossed beneath the demon king's. Her fist of metal came swinging and struck Faraganthar square in the face. Once, twice, she hit her father, until he was

forced away. It was then, sprawled as I was on the wood, that I saw the demon was now in the centre of the plaza.

‘Now!’

My shout was twinned with the combined roar of the Scions. A stab of thunder sounded as Pel loosed his big bow somewhere behind the smoke. In another battle, in another world, it would have struck his mark right through the king’s spine. Faraganthar’s reactions were unbelievable, however, and it pierced him in the shoulder, momentarily driving him to the deck. A score of arrows followed Pel’s shot and pierced the demon’s back. Those that missed landed perilously close to my feet. One hit Serisi in the leg as she rose up.

The demons at our back were all too eager to break the rules of the challenge as we had, and as I hauled myself up, they charged. The citizens of Shal Gara came bounding from their hiding places to meet them. Barkwolves leaped past me with roars of their own. Orokan, stoked into their rare and indignant frenzies, threw their huge weight and sword-like claws into the fray. Magic streamed overhead in the form of dart and tendril spells. Like two of the fabled storm-waves of the south seas, the battle clashed again. I swung my borrowed sword at anything that didn’t bleed red, ears and eyes full of madness.

In the frenzy, Serisi and I were separated from Faraganthar. The king was still bent over his injury. Several of his brutish demons stood around him, cutting down flesh as if it was maize. Fire began to billow as wizards plied their spells against ours. Between the flames, I saw the demon king rise once more, and with a single hand, pull the spear from his shoulder. Instead of throwing it away, he used it like a stave, batting warriors and beasts from the plaza.

All around me, I saw the last chance of Shal Gara fading. I felt the deck falling beneath my feet, inch by inch, then yard by yard. The carnage around us reached fever pitch. Serisi and I were the rocks the demons and navik crashed against. Only magic and a tight barrier of spears kept them at bay.

It was then that that Faraganthar unleashed his own spells. The shockwave of ash, smoke and heat broke the last of our formations. Beasts scarpered with flames on their backs. With his star-iron sword in one hand and fire in the other, the king made his way to the doors of the core of Shal Gara.

‘He’s going for the nectra!’ came the spine-chilling yell from behind me.

The Scions stood with me. Eztaral’s armour was covered in char-marks. Redeye and Pel’s eyes glowed. Atalawe’s face was a mask of blood and gore, but her teeth still shone white. Inwar still had a navik arm in his knife-like jaws.

‘It’s down to us!’ I yelled to them.

Without words, in motion of silent agreement and pure dedication, the Scions of the Sixth-Born waded into battle. It had the effect of stirring the survivors to a last stand. Not an order came from Eztaral, but we each knew it was win or die in this moment.

As Faraganthar hammered on the doors with his sword, carving chunks from the faces of the ancestors and gods, Redeye and Pel forged us a path towards him. Powerful tendrils of water and

dirt pounded against the demon forces. Steam and smoke and dust masked us as we sowed death. Eztaral and her sword sliced ribbons from anything that moved. Atalawe was a dervish of ironpith and blades. Inwar was a streak of green fur and claws. Even the smaller demons seemed to run from him. When I couldn't use the reach of my sling, I used it like a club alongside my sword and cracked skulls in every direction. The battle raged around us, but we pressed on for the demon king.

The smoke now streamed from the door as Faraganthar's fire began ate at the stout wood. The doors were thick, but not thick enough to withstand the intention of a demon.

We only gained his attention when Pel drove his magic into Faraganthar's back. The king roared deafeningly, but he did not cower. The only success was turning him from the doors. He turned as another barrage hit him in the face. I glanced at Pel, realising he was not to thank. My head swivelled backwards to see Sage Dūnekar and the Jade Wolf had joined us. The warrior sage was a blur of green blade and blood. Dūnekar's magic, witnessed at last, put a ringing in my ears. He weaved patterns with his hands so intricate I had no idea what kind of spells he cast. Even then, his face was devoid of emotion, only strain. Pel's joined with the sages to hammer at the demon king while Atalawe and Eztaral slew the remaining demons.

'Finish it, Eztaral!' Dūnekar bellowed, as he turned to keep the rest of the demons at bay.

We Scions pressed him, spreading into a sickle that cornered the now solitary Faraganthar against the doors. Serisi advanced, sword in hand. Sparks ignited as her blade clashed with her father's. The star-iron notched her blade, but she didn't let up. Spell after spell rained.

Faraganthar only laughed as he fought back. Even wounded and beset from all sides, he was a force beyond any of us.

Atalawe was knocked aside with the flat of Faraganthar's blade. Inwar, bravely going for the demon's neck, was torn loose and thrown against the wall. Earth filled Faraganthar's face before he ripped a corpse from the piles around us and hurled it at Redeye. The sorcer was flattened senseless. In the same movement, Faraganthar lunged for Eztaral and Pel. They lasted only a fraction longer against the king than the others. Pel was pushed back by a fist of fire that scorched the remaining hairs from his head until navik swarmed him. Eztaral had set about carving into the demon's legs and ribs when Faraganthar caught her sword and broke it in his fist. The eagleborn was dealt a blow that bent her double and sent her flying across the blood-washed plaza.

With a tremor of fear that brought a shake to my hands, I abruptly realised Serisi and I stood alone with Faraganthar. The realisation had not escaped my demon. She assailed her father with everything she had left to give. Faraganthar was battered in the face, even cut across his chest with a wound that would have halved a human. I had almost dared to hope for victory when Faraganthar twirled his sword in practised fashion and drove it deep into Serisi's midriff.

I watched, shouting without sound as Serisi curled over the blade.

'You are defeated, once-daughter of mine. My your fire die with whatever honour you have left,' her father snarled to her, before putting his foot on her chest and driving her from his blade.

Serisi stumbled back to crumple beside me. She stared at me with eyes now coloured a darkening amber.

I threw every stone I had until my sling was empty. Faraganthar raised his hands to fend off my attacks with a mocking laughter. I knew it was hopeless but I had no sense in me, only emotion. Only rage. I heard the shouts of those dragging themselves to survival behind me, perhaps my own mother's voice, but it didn't stop me. I held my sword up before my face as I advanced upon Faraganthar, and he at me, still laughing.

'Your time in this puny world is over, worm,' he told me.

I swung for the demon, grazing his arm before he moved to backhanded me like swatting a goblin. A swift duck saved me, and I even managed to slice into the demon's leg before his claws raked me. His other hand sent me rocketing across the deck. I landed, feeling splinters carve skin from me before I came to a stop. I felt a tooth in the middle of my mouth, and I spat it out along with the wash of blood.

With a callous laugh, Faraganthar turned back to the door, and with his claws, he ripped at its seam. Copper and bronze plates were prized apart like petals forced to unfurl.

'Let them watch!' he roared of us. 'Let them watch their undoing before they die!'

I could feel the blood seeping across me, warm and oozing. The world kept tipping from one side to the other no matter how I tilted my head. A hundred places across my body burned. In the dull echo of the battle, I saw warriors making last stands, lancewings fleeing through the burning canopy, and citizens fleeing. Not a Scion moved.

It was then my eyes came across the vial of nectra lying escaped from Redeye's hand. It was cracked and slowly leaking, but half the liquid remained. My heart stuttered in hope. Fighting dizziness, I tried to reach for it. My hands fell painfully short, and so I began to crawl. Behind me, the booming sounds of Faraganthar's efforts filled the air.

When crawling became too painful, I stretched to my limits, but even with the clicking in my shoulder, the vial remained out of reach.

While I cursed in a rasping tone, a huge hand of warped metal and grey skin reached past me, and seized the vial. The glass chimed against the demon's claws.

I angled my head to see Serisi next to me. Her eyes were now a russet red. 'Use it.'

'We'll both die.'

'We are both already dying. But there is another way,' she gasped. 'Use it as we did in Sheertown.'

I didn't need to ask her. I knew she was sure from the shine to her eyes, the weak nod. It was as if I could feel death grasping for me. Its fingers surrounded my throat as I reached for the nectra. My heart faltered in my chest.

'We were always stronger together,' she said. 'I would not admit it before, but it is the truth. And if it fails, then it will fail with us.'

'Just like in Sheertown, then,' I agreed with her, feeling the slick, sap-like liquid against my fingers. 'Exactly the same.'

With her breath close on my face, I held the nectra in my open palm, the same hand that bore the scars of our first accident. I was breathless I was so afraid, but Eztaral's words drove me on.

A cry ripped from Serisi's throat as she cleaved a claw from her own hand and stabbed it into my arm. Her eyes and ours locked, I refused to blink while she slammed her fist against my palm. The smash of nectra seemed so loud I thought the very sky had shattered above us. Both fire and nectra flooded my veins. I thought we had failed until a white light shone from the demon's eyes. It spread from her veins until mine, scarred black, took on the same glow. Pain wracked every inch of my body, enough to make my cry out for the release of death. Fire swirled around us, burning my clothes from my skin. Light blinded me until all I saw was white. The wood cracked beneath us. I felt myself falling before the lightning vanished, leaving me sprawled on the wood as before, now alone and bereft of demon. Serisi had disappeared.

'Sacrilege!' came a booming voice.

The white light had brought Faraganthar's attention crashing down on me. He had turned from the ruined door, his face a carving of holy outrage. His thunderous strides closed the distance between me.

'Serisi!' I bellowed.

The voice filled every inch of my body. *Fight, Tarko!*

I had never been so happy to hear the demon's voice.

Without hesitation, I reached for the demon king. The decking beneath me exploded as wood was torn asunder by the dirt that obeyed my clawing hands. Faraganthar recoiled as a clump of dirt smashed into him. And another. The magic flowed from me as if I was nothing but a gutter for its power.

I felt the wood beneath my knee, then my foot. Before I knew it, I was standing, and pushing every muscle that would obey into the spell. The air screeched around me as the earth built and built. Faraganthar hacked at the whirlwind to no avail. There was no finesse to my magic, but brutal, pure power. All of my training coalesced into one spell that ached to be free.

Show him, Tarko.

With a force that threw me to my knees, I released my spell. A column of earth smashed against the demon king, tossing him from his claws and backwards to the door. I aimed true: Faraganthar flew into an end of his own making. Where his own efforts had pried the metal surface from the door, he had left a blade of bronze curled outwards. With an impact that rocked the branch, Faraganthar was impaled against it.

I collapsed from the strain, utterly spent. Even lifting my head was a battle, but one I fought to see the demon king die.

Faraganthar clutched at the metal protruding from his gnarled stomach. I knew not what went on inside the bodies of demons, but he was fatally wounded. Glowing blood dribbled from both corners of his mouth. His face was a strange mix of surprise and hatred as I approached. His demons were cowed, confused, and recoiling. I felt a shuffling presence behind me, and saw Atalawe and Pel hefting themselves upright

‘Are you in there daughter?’ Faraganthar hissed at me, breath sounding short.

‘That she is, demon king, and she smiles at your death,’ I said. ‘The challenge is done. The battle is over. You have lost.’

Faraganthar found some strength to laugh. ‘Have I, worm?’

‘Your Iron Icon has no place here. Your horde stands leaderless. What else is there to win?’

A shudder of the bloodwood answered me. I dragged my eyes away from the demons to stare at the quivering branches. A horrendous groan sounded far beneath us.

Faraganthar cackled once more. ‘Your tree falls, little worm, and you with it. My wildfire has won the day for me. I may have failed my task, but so shall you.’

‘He’s right, Tarko,’ Pel breathed. ‘By the Three Gods and their spirits, he’s right! Shal Gara is falling!’

The terror gripped every survivor equally. Only I remained, staring at the dying demon king with Serisi’s intent. I felt her will belaying my feet until Faraganthar’s last smile forced me away.

Fire now streamed around the lower branches. Shal Gara was burning from the roots up. The bark already bubbled and hissed with leaking sapwater. I couldn’t ignore the sorrow in my heart to see my home so destroyed, but I could not stop to watch. I could already feel Shal Gara leaning precariously to one side. Every part of the bloodwood trembled.

My escape began with me stumbling my way across the deck. I may have had Serisi fuelling my body, but I was still wounded. It took Eztaral and Atalawe to keep me upright.

‘I need to find my mother!’ I yelled. ‘Tesq, Ralish!’

‘They’ll be safe by now, Tarko!’

‘Shut your mouths and move! MOVE!’ screamed the eagleborn.

I ran as fast as my body would allow, and by the time we reached the western side of the tree, I saw the Neathering almost entirely engulfed in flames. From the battlements and broken leafroads, survivors fled any way they could. Their shouts deafened me. Ropes, ladders, and vines draped from the bloodwood, and those that could scrambled down them with alacrity. It pained my heart to see a pitiful few descending ropes too close to the flames, screaming as they were engulfed. Other weaker survivors unable hold on and plummeted to the loam below. Those who were trapped or unable to climb waved their hands for lancewings to save them. The birds darted in and out of the inferno, snatching citizens in their claws one by one. A maddening few knelt and raised their hands to the gods for help as if that would save us.

Ropes shot from big bows were our only escape. Body after body slid down them while thick crowds pressed from behind. Here and there, citizens were pushed from the branch by panic behind them.

As ever, Eztaral was there to bring order to chaos. With a few slaps to silence the terrified, she had the crowd in control within moments. The ropes and big bows groaned under the strain of the constant stream of people. With every agonising second that passed, the bloodwood leaned ever further.

Our turn came not a moment too soon. The smoke had become debilitating. The heat might not have bothered my demon-bound body, but I could see others passing out left and right. Unconscious Redeye was lashed to the rope. Inwar, limping and half-carried by Atalawe, went next. Then, with much forcing, Eztaral. Finally Pel and I stared at each other, his blind gaze meeting the eyes that burned in my skull.

‘After you, old man.’

Pel gripped me by the shoulders and tied the rope about me instead. ‘You’ve done us proud. You and your demon.’

Go, Tarko, Serisi urged me.

With a kick from the branch, I fell backwards and let the rope catch me. With a horrid lurch, I began to slide. With the inferno seeking to reach me from below, I turned my head to the shivering canopy of my home, and watched the pirouetting of the falling copper leaves, and the glitter of the lancewings playing saviour.

A sound akin to the sky tearing apart stabbed my ears, and I whirled around to see the burning roots of Shal Gara giving way. The wildfires had won as Faraganthar promised. Sparks and splinters shot into the upper branches as the bloodwood began to topple. My stomach lurched as the rope sagged. I was falling with the bloodwood.

‘Pel!’ I bellowed, but I could not see the old man behind me. I tried to grab the rope to stop myself but it burned my palm. I was powerless to do anything but watch the mighty Shal Gara fall and pray I beat it to the loam.

Into churned loam I fell and tumbled. A pain in my left arm took the breath from me. Screams filled my ears as citizens fled in every direction to escape Shal Gara’s shadow. I stared back at the bloodwood, neck craning and jaw dropping at the sight of Shal Gara. The giant was aiming for me in its fall. Buildings toppled and crashed through the branches. The mess of war slid from leafroads and fell as hail upon the fleeing crowds.

‘Pel!’ I called out. There wasn’t a sign of him on the rope. ‘Where are you, curse it!’

We need to keep moving, Tarko! Serisi deafened me. If you die now after all we’ve fought for, I swear—

‘Gah!’ I roared, helpless. I did as I was told, throwing myself across the earth in a mad dash. Through the smoke, I glimpsed Eztaral far ahead and waving her arms frantically at me. Crates and wagons smashed around me as I sprinted for her. Again and again, I tumbled, breaking my arm twice over. And still I couldn’t escape the fall of Shal Gara.

‘Tarko!’ was the last I heard before the thunder of the bloodwood filled the air and the darkness swallowed me. The tip of branch met the earth before me, and the noise of it snapping under its own weight drove the air from my lungs. I watched a market reduced to splinters. Breathless, I ran a mad, zigzag path for the only daylight I could see. I couldn’t bare to look behind me unless I saw my doom; I could only run with hands raised over my head. Dirt formed around me, and in the chaos, I saw my demon fleeing with me, fending off what debris she could.

My heart felt close to bursting when something crashed to the ground at my heels. The shockwave threw me into the air, and I landed pit of earth that Shal Gara had dug with her roots. With splinters and planks showering me, like a newborn, I curled in on myself, shut my eyes, and roared with the bloodwood until the world was choked in darkness and silence.

It took a demon's whisper to tell me I was still alive.

Tarko? Are we dead?

Before I could answer, rough hands seized me by the neck. I opened my eyes to find a shroud of earth around me, and I spat dirt as I was hauled up. Smoky daylight greeted me, alongside the mismatched and watering eyes of Eztaral Kraid. The other Scions stood behind her in a wasteland of fallen bloodwood leaves and burned earth. Ash stained their bloody faces grey.

'Pelikai?' Eztaral rasped at me.

I looked behind us, finding the sharp roof of a lancewing nest buried mere feet from where I had fallen. Beyond, Shal Gara's crown lay broken. The bloodwood's surviving branches reached hundreds of feet into the air, hidden in their own smoke. I did not recognise the corpse of my home.

As the tears began to stream from my burning eyes, I looked to Eztaral, and shook my head. The eagleborn did nothing but seize me in an embrace, and hold me against her. I did not fight her.

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ASHES

You would be forgiven for thinking the sixth-born were the lowest of the Swathe's rungs. Quite the contrary. We are freer than first-born. The task of keeping track of the Swathe's ever-changing borders is merely a calling. Our gift is that we alone know the Swathe in its fullest, and that's why we have a saying: you can see the whole world from one tree.

FROM THE ONLY SURVIVING COPY OF "KĪ RAXA'S MUSINGS"

No longer did I need to be asleep to walk through a nightmare.

Even after a day, the fires of Shal Gara refused to die. The mighty bloodwood existed now as a broken and charred edifice. The handful of sorcers that survived the war and Shal's Gara's fall worked as dogged creatures, covered in soot, working across the husk of its bark to put out the flames. Workers toiled in crews, still trying to save upturned cottages from burning while twigs popped and giant leaves curled all around them.

The crown of the bloodwood had fallen the hardest. Height had been the nobles' undoing. The Crimson Crown lay in shatter amongst the rubble of painted mansions. At the roots, Shal Gara was barely more than charcoal. What remained of the Neathering still burned. The Midern was wrecked. Broken branches, their wounds red as blood, stuck out from the mess like the ribs of some desiccated animal.

Those who had survived Shal Gara stood in their paltry thousands between the receding wildfires and the dead bloodwood. Tears flowed freely. Other survivors prostrated themselves on the ground. The stink of destruction and ash hung thick between them and heavy as hearts. The Swathe was muted in the wake of the battle. Only the mourning squawk of crows and chattering kanalat snakes disturbed the awkward hush.

The demons that had not perished alongside us in the fall had retreated with their flames. Hundreds still remained, but without their leader or their prize, the war in them was extinguished. The Last Clan had lost, and with no nectra, the Iron Icon would remain in the Starless Plains where he no doubt belonged, and the Swathe would be spared his terrors.

Though the Swathe and Shal Gara still burned enough to choke our lungs and bring a rain of ash, the smoke was beginning to clear. In glimpses between the smog, we saw the sun goddess

restored at last. Her golden disk, whole once more, stared down at our dismal scene. I raised my hands, stared past the black veins beneath my skin, and held the sun's face between my fingers.

'Victory, 'Eztaral whispered in my ear, 'often comes at a great cost.'

I hadn't heard her approach. Nor the others. Mother and Tesq came to hug me again, a habit they had developed since the last battle and one that Serisi seemed rather disturbed by. Ralish, though she had said little to me and her eyes were full of intrigue over the demon once again within me, took my hand. Only Redeye stayed distant, staring at me from the corners of his eyes as if he blamed me personally for Shal Gara's death. I knew he was not alone. I had seen the blame that I carried in plenty of ashen faces amongst the survivors. One woman had gone as far as to spit on me.

'No sign of Pel yet?' I asked.

'Atalawe and Inwar are taking their turn looking for him. There are a lot of people still trapped between the branches. A lot of injured for the healers to see to. But we will find him, mark my words. I won't see this day any darker.'

I shook my head and felt the pain thump in my head. Rejoining with the demon was not without its downfalls, but already I was feeling Serisi's strength coursing through me. 'Barely feels like a victory at all. Look at what we're left with. I failed to protect Shal Gara and my home. That was what I promised you all and I couldn't do it. Even Pel...' I croaked with a throat scored by smoke and my emotions. 'I let him down most of all. I should have made him jump first.'

'Oh, but you didn't fail, Tarko. The Swathe is our home, not just Shal Gara, and you protected it from a worse fate. A demon king lies dead and his horde scattered because of you,' Eztaral took a moment to breathe. 'And that, if I have to speak honestly, makes me proud.'

The words brought a smile back to my face, but Eztaral avoided my eyes.

'Pel would be proud too,' my mother told me, her hand on my shoulder. She had saved Misfit before the last battle, and the shrewbat was currently perched around her neck. Misfit raised a hesitant paw, still untrusting of me, and decided to stick where he was. I didn't blame him: he knew what hid within me.

'Without you,' mother said, 'Shal Gara would have truly perished, and through it all, that old toad Pel kept his promise to keep you safe. Somewhat safe, at least. Fear shapes a future, they say, and I suppose I let mine get to me.'

'There's no question about it.' Ralish nodded. 'Not to mention dismantling the Bloodlaws. It's no longer a hope now as it was in the mines. And here I was thinking you were either useless or all talk.'

'Does that mean you're proud of me as well?' I asked.

Ralish narrowed her eyes. 'Pleasantly surprised, thank you very much.'

I bent my hand to the earth and Serisi's shape swirled around me in dust. Ralish quickly stepped away as the demon's face came close to hers. It would take her time, just like it took me. Or at least that's what I hoped.

Serisi's voice was a whisper. '*We* saved us,' she corrected us all. 'I won't have Tarko Eztaral watched the demon closely. 'I never thought I'd be thanking a demon, never mind thanking one, but here I stand.'

Serisi spread her jaws wide in what Eztaral took a few moments deciding was a grin.

'Let's be truly honest,' I sighed. 'It was Pel that saved the Swathe. Without him keeping the Scions alive, without him kidnapping me, none of us would be here. The demons and the Fireborn would have won.'

'Tarko! Eztaral!' came a cry from the wreckage of the bloodwood. There, amongst the leaves and broken branches, I spied Atalawe waving her arms, and heard the wowl of Inwar at her side. Behind her, a dozen healers were trying to drag something out of the foliage.

With my injuries afire, I ran as fast as I could manage. Eztaral and my mother were right alongside me, but it was hobbling Redeye who outpaced us.

Atalawe was on her knees, pressing her hands to the chest of what I assumed to be a corpse. It was Pel, white as narin fronds and soaked in blood. A bone protruded from his arm, and a spar of wood ran straight through his side. I felt a stab in my heart as I collapsed at his side.

'Give him space, Tarko!' Atalawe cried at me with tears on her cheeks. 'Let him breathe.'

'Breathe? He's alive?' I blurted.

'Of course he's alive! You think something as simple as a falling tree could kill the Scourge of the Scorchroad? Three Gods, no.'

I seized Pel's hand and felt the faintest strength grip me back. It seemed to wake him slightly. One eye fluttered. Dried blood cracked as his mouth parted.

'Is it over?' he hissed.

Eztaral knelt in the mud and cradled Pel's head. 'For now, old friend.'

Pel let out a ragged breath. 'You mean to say I can die contented now?'

'Don't you dare,' grunted my mother.

Atalawe got to work seeing to a stretcher. With our help, Pel was soon being carried across the dead earth. It was then, with the Scions gathered together, that the survivors began to stamp their feet, or bang their fists on their armour. It was a solemn, steady beat, and it grew until the crowd thundered in place of Shal Gara's drums. Even with Serisi's dusty form standing beside me, they cheered.

'Are you going to ask them, Tarko?' the demon mused. 'I can feel the question on your mind.'

'Ask them what?' mother said at my side.

I leaned closer to Pel. 'Does this mean I'm a Scion yet?'

Pel croaked with a faint chuckling. 'Yes Tarko, I suppose it does.'



When the sun goddess fell from the sky and evening came, the survivors of Shal Gara lit no torches and sought no vinelight. The wildfires and the burning bloodwood gave us all the light we needed for the matriarch's court.

Through her envoy's orders and the bravery of several rapid lancewings, Danaxt and half her sages had survived Shal Gara's fall. Sages Wasaqa, Maku and Tok had perished in battle. Kol Baran had yet to be found. The last anyone had seen of him, he was escaping into the loam and refusing to look back. Shame over his son's betrayal, the whispers said. Dūnekar and Saronash the Jade Wolf had both been gravely injured, and stood supporting each other at Envoy Okarin's side. There were no crystal seats nor thrones for them to perch on now, just the same loam as the rest of us. Only Danaxt took a seat, sat upon the carapace of her trained beetle, and by the crook of her back and her headed brows, she was not immune from the sorrow of the day. Truthfully, she looked physically injured by it.

Alone and apart from the crowds, the Scions of the Sixth-Born stood awaiting the matriarch's words. I didn't know whether they would be of congratulations or of punishment, and the waiting was making me sweat.

Whatever they were destined to be, the words never came.

Whether the smoke had poisoned her throat or she couldn't bring herself to speak, the matriarch sat in silence for an age until she beckoned instead for her daughter. Okarin bent her ear to the matriarch before striding out into the empty circle.

'First, my mother Matriarch Danaxt wishes to thank all of you for what you've done for us. The Scions of the Sixth-Born will forever be remembered by all tribes and welcomed in the court of Shal Gara for your bravery, skill, and magic. Without you all, we would be nought but ash on the breeze, and the Swathe would be doomed to fall. Even you, the demon called Serisi, are counted as a hero of Shal Gara. Songs will be sung of you for seasons to come.'

Scattered cheers rang out for us. Half the crowd stayed expressionless and unblinking, staring at the dusty shape of Serisi standing beside me. The other Scions nodded and bowed their thanks. Pel, propped up and swaddled in bandages, could only nod, and yet he did that with pride. I should have felt as pleased as they were, but there was a crease in Okarin's brow I did not like the look of. Her gaze was now fixed on me.

'Step forwards, Maven Terelta.'

Serisi stepped with me, loping a dozen paces from the circle. I stood as tall as my aching body would allow.

The envoy whispered to her mother again, and turned back to us with a sigh. The beads in her hand shifted rapidly. 'Maven Terelta. Though your deeds were vital in defeating the demons, and we will not deny your sacrifice, Matriarch Danaxt... Okarin took a breath, and paused so long

her mother had to nudge her to continue. ‘Matriarch Danaxt cannot forget your lies, your betrayal, and that you were the cause of many deaths. And neither can this council of sages.’

‘Envoy!’ Eztaral shouted, accompanied by a gasp that ran through the onlookers. She and the others were immediately at my side. Mother placed her hands protectively on my shoulders.

I shook my head to Serisi’s confused growling. ‘What does this mean, Tarko?’

‘Are you going to hang us, Envoy? Throw us in what’s left of the Burrows?’ I yelled back.

Okarin stared at me with her crimson eyes while she waited for quiet. ‘My mother has ordered no such thing. Instead, balancing your crimes and your deeds, she has decreed you and you alone be exiled from Shal Gara.’

‘This is preposterous!’ Pel wheezed.

‘The matriarch also orders the immediate reinstatement of the Bloodlaws and their order. As such you may keep your rank and tribe, but you shall not belong to this bloodwood. This is my mother’s decree, and she has spoken,’ the envoy said. I could almost hear her grinding her teeth. She looked as frustrated as I felt. She alone looked dissatisfied. Dūnekar and Saronash were impassive, with the Jade Wolf’s head bowed and fists clenched. A rustle spread through the lower ranks of the survivors.

Ralish surprised me with her vehemence. ‘Getting rid of the Bloodlaws was the smartest thing you did!’ she yelled at my side. ‘It saved us all!’

Serisi’s shape grew taller. Her claws spread. ‘They would betray us, for all we did?’

Danaxt broke her silence to answer the demon. ‘The war you brought upon us is over. It took everything from us. Order is all we have left, and it must be restored,’ she said in a croaking voice barely above a whisper. ‘These are our commands.’

I held out my hands for quiet, parting the Scions so I could be seen and heard. By all rights a rage should have burned with me, but I merely smiled instead.

‘I thought this war had changed us for the better, but I see now it hasn’t. I should have expected this, seeing as the Bloodlaws have always trampled those who sweat and toil and die for the good of those who keep them. I accept your sentence, Matriarch, Sages. Envoy. I gladly accept it, even, because now I know my home is truly gone and perished.’

‘Tarko!’ Okarin called to me as I turned my back, but the matriarch hissed something that kept the envoy firmly at her side. I shook my head at her and continued to walk while my family and Scions. When I reached the crowd, with Serisi coming over me, the crowd parted like a cloven hedgerow. Some of their hands touched my shoulders. Others stared. Some even curled their lip, but I did not care. I knew what I was and all that I had done in the name of survival. I knew I had saved them, and their gratitude or lack thereof mattered nothing to me.

‘Tarko!’ came another shout. It was my mother, running after me. Tesq and Ralish chased her.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ mother chided me.

I was momentarily confused. ‘Did you not hear the matriarch?’

‘I mean alone, you fool. What? Do you think for one moment I’m going to watch you be exiled and not come with you? I am your mother, curse you. What would your father say?’

Tesq slapped me on the arm and the broken bone protested. ‘Somebody has to make sure you don’t get into more trouble.’

I looked to Ralish. ‘And you?’

Ralish sniffed at the night air. ‘There’s nothing left for me here, and I refuse to return to a worker’s life. Besides, you’re far too unreliable to leave unattended. Either of you,’ she said, stare sneaking to the demon. ‘Somebody’s got to keep you in check.’

I caught the sly smile she offered me and returned it twofold.

Eztaral waded into our huddle. ‘We better get moving, unless you want to stand around picking at your arses until nightfall.’

‘What?’ I blurted, partially confused by the delightful imagery.

‘You can stow that confusion, Maven.’

Atalawe shrugged. ‘You’re a Scion now, and that means we stay together.’

In Atalawe’s grip, hunched over his wounds, Pel managed to wag his finger. ‘Not to mention that Haidak and Juraxi are still missing, and the remaining demons that need to be hunted down before they cause any further chaos.’

Inwar agreed with a yowl, and as one, we all turned to Redeye.

The mudmage worked his lips for a moment before throwing up his hands and limping ahead of us towards the deep forest. ‘Why you fools are so set on dying instead of living a quiet life, I’ll never know,’ came his passing mutter.

Atalawe laughed as she and the others followed the sorcer. I couldn’t help but grin at the family I had found. They were all the home I needed.

‘You will all be exiled, if you choose to follow him!’ came the shrill and distant warning of the matriarch.

Serisi and I stayed back to look a last time on the smouldering Shal Gara and the watchful eyes of its survivors. I held the envoy’s gaze once more. It was then Okarin took a step as if to follow us, but as though an unseen chain was looped about her, Danaxt called her back, and she stayed at her mother’s side.

I patted the pocket where Misfit lay and heard a confirmatory squeak. ‘Ready, Serisi?’

The demon flexed her claws as her form and my magic faded. Her voice slid into my head.

‘I am, Tarko. For what, I don’t know.’

‘Neither do I, and for once, I welcome it.’

To the snarl of my demon, I set my feet for the loam that awaited me and did not look back at Shal Gara again. For once, it was my choice, and for the first moment in my life, I felt truly free.

Epilogue

The Loamsedge was ruled by ash and the burning eyes of wandering cinders. What remained of the Swathe's edge was not worth measuring, beyond calling it a hillock of black and smoking wood. The fires within its husk still smouldered. Here and there lesser roots and stumps burned alike as funeral candles.

No life dared to tread the choking landscape save for one. A red stone mask hung in his hands, looking like molten wax in the firstlight fires. A copper blade ran down his hip.

Juraxi glared at the sun beneath the shield of his hand. The goddess was now as whole and unmarred as the day of his foiled execution. He blinked the spots away at regarded the scorched earth instead. The hems of his robes smouldered and smoked, but Juraxi felt it a blessing. Scattered around his boots were fragments of bones and teeth burned black. Juraxi held no remorse. There had been no waste. They had been sacrificed in glorious fire, sanctified as he had been.

A brisk wind was driven by the roar of a golden lancewing bursting from the smoke-ridden sky. Juraxi hid his face with his mask as a whirlwind of ash sought to blind him. The force of the creature's wings drove him backwards.

The enormous bird's claws crunched in the charcoal. Boots thudded beside them as a figure dismounted with its cloak flapping in the draught. A long glaive stabbed the earth in furious rhythm.

'You're late,' called Juraxi.

Haidak Baran slammed the blade of his obsidian glaive in the charcoal of a root stump disturbingly close to Juraxi's foot.

'You dare to speak to me as an equal, messenger, and that is not a mistake you want to make. Trust me, Juraxi. Not when my glaive and I thirst for blood!'

'Tarko Terelta's, I imagine?'

The stump crumbled to ash as Haidak wrenched the weapon free. Haidak's lancewing made the sound of sparkstones clashing.

'The very same.'

Juraxi stared west. 'Did you see King Faraganthar fall?'

'With my own eyes, at the hands of Tarko and his demon, no less.'

'How by chaos did Tarko do it?'

‘You owe our dear dead demon king too much thought. He is gone. He wasted his chance at claiming Shal Gara’s nectra and the doors he promised to open remain shut. He matters no more. We can be the chaos the Swathe needs, not him.’

Juraxi showed his teeth behind warped lips. ‘Faraganthar was our path to the Iron Icon—’

‘Faraganthar was weak! He was a means to an end, don’t you see? He failed, and with him lying dead, even with their bloodwood fallen, Shal Gara thinks it won. *Tarko* thinks he won. I will not stand for that!’

Juraxi shook his head. The demon king had seen fit to spare him for a purpose, and that loyalty refused to die with Faraganthar. ‘This is about more than Tarko and Shal Gara. We must find the demons...’

The tip of the glaive pressed again Juraxi’s sternum.

‘Incorrect, messenger,’ warned Haidak. This has *everything* to do with Tarko. He ruined the war, and with him breathing he will continue to be a splinter beneath my nails. And last time I checked, Juraxi, it was I that led the Fireborn, not a piece of Loamsedge scum with a melted face like you. Half of you are no better marauders and Scorchfolk. Your bloodlines are filth. I’m beginning to doubt giving you that stone mask and red cloth.’

Before the noble could exercise more of his anger on Juraxi, charcoal branches snapped in the blackened forest.

‘You’re not the only one who’s late, Haidak,’ muttered Juraxi, scorned and feeling the sting of sweat on the remaining parts of his face that refused to heal.

Out of the veil of smoke emerged shapes of dark cloth and cowls over faces of jade. First a dozen, then twice that, until at last a hundred figures they stood in silence in the ash. The Fireborn had gathered as commanded. Half had failed to make it.

A lone figure did not stop. It approached in measured pace, boots crushing the wasteland without pause. A bright red gown wrapped the individual from head to toe, and a full mask of jade, with no apparent gap for eyes or mouth.

Juraxi stared, as he always did, at the stone-carved eyes and wondered hard who hid behind them. Haidak’s second had never taken their mask off. Juraxi had often wondered whether even Haidak knew of their identity, given what trust he put in this fellow.

‘The surviving demons are gathering in the north near Sheertown, maybe seventy at the most. They are leaderless, aimless. Lost,’ came the inscrutable voice from behind the stone. It was maddeningly hoarse and fair at the same time. Juraxi found himself leaning closer, peering.

Haidak brandished his finger as though he might use it to cut the newcomer’s throat. ‘I don’t care a speck of ash for the demons except that they do what I tell them from now on. I wager they will have their uses for what’s to come. Juraxi can inform them they have a new king now, and this one won’t choke at the moment of victory. If they wish to see their god again, they will obey.’

‘I... can?’ Juraxi asked, but he was given little time to ponder the wide variety of problems with such a task.

'Now what of the wretch?' Haidak demanded.

'Tarko has left Shal Gara. He hunts you.'

'Then let him do so, along with Eztaral and her Scions. They will soon see what foolish persistence buys them,' said Haidak with a noble sneer. 'And as for you, our good friend. 'Here he pointed at their third ringleader. 'I have decided you will be responsible for leading him down a path straight to me and my glaive. Unless, of course, you have a problem or concern of conscience with doing so?'

It was a question with a sharpened edge, and they took their time to stare out across the Scorch. 'Have I complained of anything yet, Baran?' they spoke confidently. 'I have Tarko's trust. He will come to you.'

'Then it is settled!' Haidak bayed, raising his hands to the sibilant hissing of the hundred Fireborn. His golden lancewing beat its wings like the complaints of a longsun storm as he paraded back and forth in celebration. Juraxi stood in silence, doubting – not for the first time – in the one they called a leader.

'Tarkosi Terelta and the Scions will die in the flames of our revenge!'