

# THE QUARTER MASTRA

Promo Excerpt



MARK VELDON

# **The Quartermastra**

*Promotional Excerpt*

## **Deserian Tales #1**

**By Mark Veldon**



**Proximal Press**

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# Maps





## Story Note

This novel was written in the Huchiun territory on land originally protected by the Confederated Villages of Lisjan.

May you celebrate indigenous cultures and support efforts to vitalize ways often lost to or hindered by colonization. Here in the East Bay of San Francisco, that might mean paying [shuumi to the Sogorea Te' Land Trust](#).

To all the writers  
who've come before,  
their craft and imagination  
lighting the way.

May this story dance  
in their shadows,  
throwing out shapes,  
spurring visions  
and leading others  
to dream.



*WHAT DOES THE CAPTAIN WANT?*

The words and the worry that went with them had been winding tighter as Tal Ch'kola rode to Harmony. Normally, an early evening ride would be a bright spot in her day, the sun slipping behind the horizon and gilding the lands in a rich reddish gloaming, rolling hills rising to mountains in the east, flatlands of dried-out grasses and well-tended fields falling to Sumneko River in the west. It was dazzling. Mixed together with the steady clop of hooves and a fresh cool breeze, this was as close to joy as Tal knew.

But tonight she couldn't appreciate it. Not even the rising song of crickets could improve her mood. Her worry was a painful knot between her shoulder blades, growing worse each time she wondered why the Captain had summoned her. Try as she might, she couldn't puzzle it out. Her accounts were all in order, the required reserves in place. The Captain knew nothing of her side deals. What could the Captain want? Tal stared at the flickering lights of the distant town but they gave her no new clue—so she turned elsewhere.

“Do you know what this is about?” Tal said to her assistant riding on her left.

Jereo shot a glance at the other rider, who looked straight ahead with half-lidded eyes. “He didn't say much. Only that the Captain wanted you. You know how Starlans are with us.”

She did. Most Starlans tried to speak as little as possible to Eru. She jerked her head to the side to scare off a mosquito, looking again toward the town. Banks of fog usually came down from the foothills, reducing the town to a hazy orange glow. Tonight though, the sky

was clear enough to make out the gleaming row of gas lamps running along Edgerton Road to the village green.

Harmony. As the Starlans had spread out, laying claim to the land, they gave their towns names like this, expressing the hope for their lives in these lands. Providence. Haven. Bounty. The places never lived up to their namesakes—at least not for Eru like Tal, the people who'd been here before the Starlan invasion.

The third rider cleared his throat, drawing Tal's eyes. He wore good winter boots, unusual attire for early autumn. The sight reminded Tal to check with her suppliers when she got the chance. Regional wasn't likely to send enough boots and the meager stock they did send would go to Starlan soldiers first. This was the case with the most even-handed of commanders. Captain Olania was anything but, more likely to send the boots back than see them given to Eru.

"Sounds pretty quiet," Jereo said.

Tal agreed. Harmony wasn't a large town, home to perhaps three thousand. Even after midnight it was common to hear shouts and murmurs, slammed doors and bursts of music. It wasn't exactly silent now. She could hear a low drone of voices but the other sounds were absent. The place felt subdued.

*Why had the Captain sent for me?*

Tal rode on without an answer. In a few minutes she reached the edge of Harmony, coming upon the first of the small, well-kept houses lining Edgerton Road. Tal and her escort rode past a dozen such houses before they saw anyone, a Starlan matron heading the other way, lantern in hand, scattering light across the bare porches and orderly side yards of Crafra's Row.

During the day, signs would be up, a hammer and anvil for blacksmiths, thread and needle for tailors, jacket and awl for leather workers. This lane was home to some of the better artisans in town,

those who could afford to pay the premium for the traffic coming in and out of Harmony. Taller buildings loomed to the south, manors of the rich, local Starlan planters and merchants, while to the north stood rows of ramshackle tenements for poor Eru and Starlan workers—and beyond them the bulky shapes of warehouses and coppa refineries. Tal crinkled her nose against their bitter smell. She was thankful it wasn't as strong here as in the northside neighborhoods.

“Private Kayn,” the Starlan matron with the lantern said to the third rider, her eyes taking in Tal and Jereo, the lines of her face tightening. “Give my regards to Captain Olania. I trust she'll get to the bottom of this.”

“Illu willing,” Private Kayn said. “I'll let the Captain know.”

Tal shared a look with Jereo, a faint flash in the eyes, there and gone. Had something happened? Were Eru involved? It was hard to know what the woman's scowl meant. Most Starlans barely tolerated Eru, their feelings landing somewhere between open disdain and mild disapproval. This sentiment extended even to those Eru serving in the army.

Tal's unease deepened as they continued. At the first major cross street leading north, only three Eru stood, whispering, eyes turned toward the town green. Seeing so few was a small shock to Tal. Most nights a crowd of a dozen or more, mostly Eru, would be milling about, walking between the porches, shouting and shoving, laughing and pointing off to the next tavern they meant to call on.

*What was going on?*

Tal passed a Starlan barkeep silhouetted in the glow of an empty tavern, polishing a glass as she leaned against the doorjamb. Tal couldn't remember ever seeing that tavern empty. Catching sight of Tal the barkeep turned and went back inside. At the next block there were more Starlans standing on the raised sidewalks along the

south side of the road, gesturing to the imposing silhouette of the sheriff house. Many glared as Tal and Jereo rode past.

*Definitely an Eru thing.*

Up ahead the road crossed a slow-moving stream before splitting in two to enclose the town green. The south loop led to the sheriff house and town hall where a crowd filled the street, tightly packed before a covered dais built for public proclamations on market days. Tal rose up in the saddle. Torch stands encircled the dais, ropes running between them with soldiers strung out in a line to keep the crowd back. Two soldiers were up on the dais roof, lowering a bundle wrapped in canvas. No, not a bundle. A body. Two more lay on the roof.

“Gyh s’an,” Tal cursed softly.

“Make way,” Private Kayn said. People at the back of the crowd turned, looking up before stepping aside. Most of the crowd was Starlan, pale skinned with black, brown or blonde hair. Tal could feel their eyes on her, like the heat of a burning brand passing near her face.

Tal and Jereo followed in Private Kayn’s wake, Tal’s gaze drawn to the bodies. They were wrapped in mud-smeared canvas, only their heads exposed. With the light catching their skin, Tal could see they were Starlan, likely matrons, their hair tied up in the elaborate braids fashionable among the more respectable in town.

No wonder everyone was on edge. Someone had killed three matrons. Tal was still registering this fact as she studied the bodies. Something else was off. She tried to make sense of it, her eyes drawn to the geometric markings covering the canvas on the bodies. There was nothing special there. She’d seen countless fabrics with such markings, similar patterns used by many Eru peoples. She even had a cloth mat with a similar design, a keepsake passed down along her mother’s side from the old days before the Starlans.

Why was she feeling so unsettled?

Making her way through the crowd she found her answer. At the foot of the dais the air hummed, as if the wind was working up to a low groan. She'd felt this a handful of times before and it always meant the same thing.

Spirit magic.

"Tsei'a sou, gyh-bou h'ee," Tal whispered. It was a phrase her aunts and cousins liked to use when things took a bad turn at the worst time.



## 2

SINCE ARRIVING on the shores of the Eru Peninsula a thousand years ago and giving the land their name, the Starlans had waged a war against spirit magic. It started with missionaries sent out among the Eru, demanding they give up their beliefs and follow the Way of Light, embracing All-Mother Illu, the Starlan goddess of life and light.

When the Eru people resisted, continuing to practice the rituals of healing and guidance and thanksgiving they'd observed since time immemorial, the missionaries shook their heads. To them spirit magic was a blight upon the land, bringing evil, unleashing an invisible hand that twisted hearts and stole the strength from the people.

Eventually, the Starlans came in overwhelming numbers, forcing the Eru onto small preserves as they built their own cities and towns and communities. They told the Eru the old ways were dead, that they could no longer practice spirit magic. When the Eru continued to worship in secret, the Starlans resorted to hunting down any who held onto the old ways, murdering the spirit maegas, the rongantas, until spirit magic was little more than a memory in stories. For the most part. There were still rare occasions when a child or teenager would stumble on some secret, only to be swept up and given to All-Mother Illu's righteous flames.

If the Starlans knew Tal could sense spirit magic, she too would lose her life. As a small child she discovered this sensitivity and asked Mother about it. "Don't speak of it. Don't even think of it, sweet one," Mother said. "We had a few rongantas in the family many generations ago, before our people were brought under Starlan rule. They were all given to All-Mother Illu and her fires."

So Tal had done as Mother bid, keeping the magic hidden. A few years later the Starlans tested her for spirit magic, as they did all Eru, but they didn't know what to look for, spirit magic having grown so uncommon. While they didn't find her spirit magic, they did detect maega ability, the talent to use Starlan magic. "The weakest I've ever seen," the Starlan maega had said, clicking her tongue and making it seem as if Tal's meager potential was worse than none at all.

"See who they have handling the bodies?" Jereo said, drawing Tal out of her thoughts. All the soldiers handling the bodies were Eru. If some curse struck, Eru would be the ones to pay. The Captain always gave Eru the most dangerous work.

"Tell Biyan and Maitor and the others to be careful," Tal whispered to Jereo. "Who knows what sorcery might've been laid on the bodies?" Almost before the words were out, Tal regretted them. What did she really know about spirit magic? Not for the first time, she wished she knew more of her people's magic, more than the few discoveries she'd made by accident.

"Yes, QM." Jereo dismounted and hurried off toward the dais.

Tal added up what she saw. It was an old habit, seeing the world and her situation like the account ledgers she maintained. The costs, the debts, red ink for expenses and supplies against the black for incomes of the company. This would be bad for her people, bad for her plans too. These deaths would draw unwanted scrutiny right when she needed the Starlans distracted and disinterested.

Letting out a long breath, she dismounted and headed for the dais. The Captain was up there, speaking with the mayor and several other matrons. She gave the faintest frown before gesturing for Tal to take a place in a far corner.

It amazed Tal, the Captain's skill at using little touches to convey disdain and disrespect. Like sending two men to escort Tal to town. On the surface it might not appear to be anything. Most

soldiers were men after all. The Captain could say there weren't any female soldiers available to do the work, yet three stood on the line cordoning off the dais. Tal knew it wasn't because the Captain held progressive beliefs about treating men as equals, though men had certainly made progress in the last two decades. They could vote and inherit wealth now, though almost all the positions of power were still held by matrons.

If a Starlan quartermastra had been summoned to Harmony, there would've been at least one female soldier among the escort. Tal was sure of it. The escort was meant to remind Tal of her place as an Eru—as surely as being sent to the corner of the dais, left to wait while the Captain and the other important matrons finished their conversation.

“Why these three? What connects them?” the Captain said, glaring at the other women huddled around her. “Find out, Delia. We must move quickly or we're all doomed, yours and mine. Starla wants *results*, not scandals.”

Mayor Delia Sifun was a short, heavy-set matron with black hair. She stood directly across from the Captain and cleared her throat. “I'll see what I can find, Kyla, but we can't keep *this* quiet.” She waved her arm around. “It'll go to the regional governa who likely has informants already sending messages. And she will have to act. There are clear signs of magic, spirit magic. You know how the high operate.”

The mayor tapped two fingers against her lips, jeweled rings shining in the lamplight. “It will mean Kanari and army irregulars outside your command. Those women were well connected, making a lot of people back in the capital rich. Their allies will demand an accounting. We have to play this carefully.”

Sighing and shaking her head, the Captain pointed at the mayor. “If you find those responsible before my people do, bring

them to me. I will be displeased if I find you're hiding erries from me. I know you work with them."

Tal shifted to face out into the night, steeling herself, keeping a placid face despite the Captain using that word. She'd seen the little smile on the Captain's face, knew its meaning. The Captain wasn't the first commander to enjoy using that word in front of Eru subordinates. A friend once overheard the Captain telling another officer how it "let erries know where they stand."

The floorboards groaned as the Captain and the mayor moved to the railing, studying the crowd, where two knots of Eru stood apart.

Though the Starlans called them all Eru, they were actually dozens of different peoples. Tal was from the Atnali nation, whose lands were a hundred miles to the north. Jereo was Semat, born fifty miles to the northeast. The people who lived in these lands before the Starlans came were the Omaka. They were the richest Eru in all of Starla, thanks to the unique coppa crop they grew. These wondrous plants had the ability to power and even amplify magic, and the hills above Harmony were the only place in the world where coppa grew. The town of Harmony had sprung up to cure and refine the coppa into usable fibers and fabrics to be sent off to Starla City, where it would be turned into everything from clothing and upholstery to ropes, bags and even building materials. Coppa had become one of the most precious commodities in all of Deseria since the Omaka revealed its existence to the Starlans ten years ago.

Had the coppa been discovered when the Starlan conquest first reached this far south, the Omaka might've received nothing. The Starlans would've simply taken the land where the coppa grew. But times were changing and Starla wanted to show all of Deseria that it wasn't just an economic and military power but a moral one too, and so the rocky soil east of Harmony turned into a boon for the Omaka unlike any Eru nation had ever seen.

The mayor glanced at the bodies on the roof. “I don’t see why an Omaka would do this. They’re doing better now than at any time in the fifty years since we came. It makes no sense.”

“You can’t know what drives erries,” the Captain said. “Maybe these women wronged them.”

Mentioning the Omaka brought Tal’s attention to the two Omaka groups in the crowd. Those in the first were younger, dressed in the brightly colored, intricate clothing of the Starlans. One among them stood out, a heavy-set bull of a man with a little smile on his face as he took in the proceedings and whispered to a friend.

Tal had heard of him. Vigan Soriya. Word was he gambled the way a messenger drank water after a long, dry day in the saddle. Like most of the younger Omaka, he was always going on about the future glories of the Omaka, how they would be an example for all Eru in the Southern Reaches.

A dozen paces away was the other group. These Omaka were older, almost all silver haired and dressed in finely crafted deerskin or old-time cotton dresses, shirts and leggings. Their gazes went to their leader, Telara Anashee. Like Soriya she looked faintly pleased, the hint of a grin pinching the corners of her mouth. She stared up at the bodies with an intensity that reminded Tal of matrons praying to their All-Mother Illu.

“How did the bodies even get up there?” the mayor said. “Did anyone see?” Her eyes followed the soldiers carrying one of the bodies to a wagon.

“The guard says fog rolled in, as usual this time of year, though thicker,” the Captain said, gesturing off toward the sheriff house. “He couldn’t see twenty feet. When it cleared, the bodies were there. Who knows what foul magic was used.” The Captain spread her hands along the banister, the wood creaking under her grip. “We’ll talk again later. I need to start putting things to right.” The Captain waved the other women away.



“Illu’s light guide you,” the mayor said, bowing slightly. She and the other matrons made their way down the steps, walking toward the southern part of town, the Starlan district known as Atwater Hamlet.

Captain Olania watched them go. She was a tall, imposing woman in her late thirties with wiry knots of muscle running along her neck, shoulders and upper arms. She wore the everyday uniform of a Starlan officer minus a helmet: bright blue gambeson and leggings with silver trim, as well as black riding boots. She also had a belt worked with silver and gold, which held a short spear at her left hip and a wand at her right.

Though the matrons had left, the Captain still didn’t call for Tal, so she searched for more clues as to what had happened here. Below the dais, burned into the gravel was the word *Vengeance*. The same mysterious hum came from the word as from the bodies. Tal tried to decipher it using the rudimentary magical training she’d received from the Starlans. But they’d only taught her about Starlan magic, not spirit magic. Tal swallowed. Between the crowd and the bodies and the spirit magic, she didn’t like the situation at all. She wished she was back in her tent—for all the good that did.

“Quartermastra Ch’kola,” the Captain said with stern formality, signaling for Tal to approach. Even in the weak light of the torches, Tal could see the blue of the Captain’s eyes, same as the pale heights of a midday sky. Their intensity set Tal’s insides lurching like she was slipping across slick mud on the edge of a cliff. The Captain’s reddish-blond hair was bound up in severe braids, not a strand out of place.

“Maega Captain,” Tal said, coming forward and saluting with her left hand over her right fist. “You called for me?”

The Captain’s face was a mask of barely suppressed irritation, a sneer almost twisting her mouth as she took in the traditional Atnali braids running down the front of Tal’s shirt. Tal felt the Captain’s

disapproval as her eyes moved from Tal's dark-brown hair to her wide hips then back up to Tal's face, skin the same brown as aged valley-oak acorns. She could almost hear the Captain's thoughts. *It's bad enough she's an errie, but she could at least try to look more Starlan.* Teachers and commanders had been making such comments about Tal her whole life.

The Captain finally spoke, "I need teams organized to patrol through and around the town, every two hours until further notice. You will make preparations for supplies. I will give you the schedules. Also, I need to dispatch a message to regional, so be in my tent in three hours. We will likely have an additional squad of soldiers coming into camp before the week is done, so you will prepare our stores and supplies accordingly."

"Yes, Maega Captain," Tal said, keeping her voice flat, her eyes downcast. Showing deference to matrons was second nature to Tal; she'd seen how failure to do so led to scoldings, beatings or worse, depending on the mood of the matron.

The Captain nodded sharply. "You may leave."

Tal pushed her feelings aside and started adding up figures in her head. Soldiers in the field would need more portable provisions, salt pork and hard tack. She'd have to check her biweekly inquiries, find out what sources of these foodstuffs were available at a reasonable price. This investigation could run for a month—and if the Captain and mayor's words were true, there would be more mouths to feed. Tal recalled a good bit of advice from the first quartermastra she served under: "A sloppy quartermastra doesn't last." If Tal hadn't kept up the price inquiries with nearby townships every two weeks, she'd be at a loss on where to get what she needed.

Tal was still working out the figures when the Captain spoke again. "You're dismissed, quartermastra. Be on your way."

"Yes, Maega Captain." Tal could hear the undertone like the army anthem blared on a trumpet. *Fool of an errie. Why aren't you*

*gone already?*

“One more thing,” the Captain said. “Tell the soldiers to keep quiet about this. We’re still figuring things out. I *will* see those responsible answer for their crimes.”

“Of course, Captain,” Tal said. When the Captain said soldiers, she meant Eru soldiers. No Eru held a rank above corporal except Tal, so it often fell on her to act as unofficial liaison between command and the Eru soldiery. This was in addition to maintaining supply lines and levels, preparing equipment for special operations and inspecting stores to ensure they were sufficient for the needs of the company. Being a quartermaster was more than just being some stock clerk. She was the first line of defense against mutiny, the linchpin that kept the company rolling.

“Captain,” a man called as he stood up from the dirt of the street. His voice was a rough wheeze like a worn-out blacksmith’s bellows. “There is anger, rage in the making. Definitely spirit magic.”

The man hobbled up the steps, clutching at his left leg. He stopped just below the landing, slapping dirt from his hands.

If the Captain put Tal on edge, this man sent her over. Corporal Esalee Batl. He was rail-thin, uniform hanging loose on his slim frame. Not particularly tall for a Starlan, his skin was the sickly pale white of a deathcap mushroom’s underside, his eyes a pale, liquid gray. When they flicked across Tal, it was like falling onto a sheet of ice, the cold seeping into her body. Two long scars rent the right side of his face, the pink scar tissue like raised furrows in a barren field.

Rumor was the scars came from a gnoll, one of the big feral beasts, the cursekin, that infested the lands south of Starla. It was said he’d been taken captive after a raid on his family’s homestead and brought to the Cursekin Badlands by the Ikkina. Among Eru the Ikkina held a special place. They were the only nation the Starlans never conquered. From what Tal had heard, the Ikkina sold Corporal Batl to Semat Eru and that he’d lived on the frontier for years,

learning Eru ways. The Captain always went to him when she had questions about spirit magic.

The Eru soldiers whispered that he was half a ronganta himself, though no one had ever seen him work magic. Still, there were suspicions—and something about him felt wrong.

The Captain turned to Corporal Batl. “Are you sure, corporal? There haven’t been reports of Omaka using spirit magic in fifty years. My guess would be an outsider, someone in their pay?”

“Perhaps. Definitely Eru,” he said. His eyes darted to Tal for a moment.

“No matter,” the Captain said. “They’ll be found. Kanari make excellent bloodhounds.”

Kanari. Tal felt her body tense at the mention. In Eru School the teachers spoke of a rebellion among the Starlans hundreds of years ago. Men with magic had attempted a coup, brought down the capitol building in Starla City, killing everyone. After that the Starlans didn’t let men train to use magic. They felt men were too impulsive, too violent to bear the responsibility. In the long years since, the only men allowed to know the rudiments of magic were the Kanari, and they were only taught defensive magics, what they would need to protect the Starlan Federation from those who used magic to harm. It was the Kanari who carried on the crusade to root out spirit magic.

All her life she’d heard about their ferocity, their tenacity hunting anyone accused of spirit magic. Hokatika, a friend from the Nuisan nation, said a woman among her people had dabbled in compulsion, bent an entire village to her will. The Kanari came, cut through a dozen people and took the would-be ronganta away. Tal had met Kanari a couple times. They seemed alright—for Starlans. Aloof, distant. She got to know one in the eastern territories once. He’d seemed off but she was used to that in the army. Still, a Kanari

presence didn't bode well for her. It was best to steer clear of those hunting spirit magic if you had some yourself.

"You think they'll send Kanari?" Corporal Batl said. "The capital is four-hundred miles away. Even taking the dwimrail to Brasor, it'd take the better part of a week to get here."

"The Synod will send them. The coppa's too valuable," the Captain said, gazing north. "House Keylandi and the military will insist."

Corporal Batl shrugged, looking out into the night. "I'm sure these Kanari know their business but wouldn't it be better to find the killers yourself? You know the land and its people. You'd be like a wolf among sheep," Corporal Batl said, his eyes lighting on Tal as he said the word *sheep*.

"We'll discuss it later. I need to speak with the public. Settle them down."

Corporal Batl saluted, starting down the steps as the Captain shifted her gaze to Tal, who gave another half bow.

As Tal left, she caught sight of the second victim being handed down. A shiver ran through her. She recognized the matron, Maega Corrine, one of her teachers at Eru School.

Her mind went back six years to the last time she saw the woman.



### 3

THE SUN STOOD in the sky, a hazy golden orb. Tal was seventeen and home from Eru School, surrounded by the smells of Mother's store, wheat flour with its nutty hints, cedar wood and its slightly sweet scent and colza oil's fishy undertones.

She had just finished an inventory of the dry goods and was admiring the birdsong coming from the herb bushes in the garden where her little brother and his friends were running around, waving stick swords. She was glad he was enjoying his winter break but wished he'd help out more in the store. Mother wasn't getting any younger.

Tal straightened some bags of navy beans that'd slipped out of order. She enjoyed the work, putting things in their proper places. Customers might not appreciate such little details but she took comfort in them. Besides, it beat what she should be doing, tabulating the payments for the Starlan "partners," the local farmers and merchants Mother paid a cut of the profits, lest they stop selling to her. Without those goods, customers would go to one of the other shops in town, costing Mother business. Ever since Tal learned Starlan stores off the preserve didn't pay for the right to buy from these partners, the practice had infuriated her, another injustice Eru suffered that most Starlans didn't even know about.

The familiar jingle of the doorbell up front announced someone coming in. This wasn't anything out of the ordinary. People came and went all day. What was peculiar was that Mother's conversation with Alala Lereny had stopped. Lereny had been going on about some thresher machina the community had bought, how it would help save days harvesting the corn. It wasn't like Mother and Lereny to stop talking just because of a customer. Tal looked up to see who it was.

A matron stood in the doorway. The woman was average in height but a bit thick through the waist, arms and legs. She had a stiffness to her posture, reminding Tal of the faded palisades around the preserve agent's house up the road. They didn't get many Starlans in town, other than the occasional patrol, though Starlans did sometimes come in, looking to buy some of the crafts, colorful scarves and shawls, reed baskets, what the people made for market. Starlans called them "rustic treasures."

"May I help you?" Mother said. She was using her polite voice, the one she reserved for rude suppliers, tax collectors and anyone asking about Tal's father, who'd disappeared four years earlier.

"Tal Ch'kola. Is she here?" the matron said. The voice was almost respectful, so unlike its usual tone that Tal didn't recognize it at first. But she did know that voice, did know this matron. Maega Corrine, one of the teachers from school.

"She's near the back, doing inventories. Talenda?" Mother said.

The maega moved into the store, scanning the aisles, lips formed into a vague frown. She wore simple, unadorned leggings of charcoal gray, a loose, billowy blouse of pale blue and a bulky vest a shade darker. Long dangling earrings of opal and reddish-purple amethysts set in silver hung from her ears. Like most Starlan matrons, she had a severe cast to her face, her gray-green eyes inspecting everything around her. She ran the end of a bolt of fabric between thumb and forefinger, sparing a glance at a patterned rug.

*Why is she here?* Teachers never came to the preserves, at least not that Tal had heard. Tal knew she should speak up but it took a moment to find her voice. "H—here, Maega Corrine."

The maega turned, the flicker of a smile passing across her face. "Ahh, there you are, child." She crossed an aisle on her way to Tal, stopping to inspect a set of dwimstone windchimes Mother had bought the season before. So far no one on the preserve had shown much interest in windchimes that tinkled and glowed in the dark—

and cost more than most earned in a fortnight. But Mother had a gift when it came to knowing what to buy. She always found someone to sell such things to. Tal suspected Mother bought this piece just to have something special in the store for a while. She'd probably find a buyer at one of the big spring Tiwokan markets.

Smoothing her apron, Tal checked that her sleeves weren't out of place while setting her eyes on the floor and rising into a more rigid posture. Having gone days without playing the dutiful Eru student, Tal worried she might slip and act in a way that displeased the maega, who was now looking at a woolen shawl with fine Atnali embroidery in the shape of prairie flowers, delicate blues and rich reds. Lareny left the store with another jingle of the doorbell while Mother pretended to straighten a bin of pots and pans, watching with veiled interest.

Tal made a quick bow as the maega approached. "It's an honor to have you here on Atnali Preserve."

"It is an honor," the maega said. "Rarely do we teachers visit our students on their . . . preserves. I've only been on Atnali Preserve once before. For one of those market celebrations . . ."

"Tiwokan?" Tal said.

"Yes, that's it." The maega gave Tal a searching look. "You're probably wondering why I'm here. I was doing a tour of the lands and thought I might drop in for a visit, discuss your *future*."

Tal could feel her eyes widening before she stripped away any hint of expression. Maega Corrine had never taken much interest in her before. The maega taught accounting and logistics classes. While Tal had done well in both, they'd never spoken beyond the classroom. The maega wasn't much for fostering anything close to a relationship with students, known more for her no-nonsense demeanor and intolerance of anything except obedience from students. "My future?" Tal said.

“Yes, child,” Maega Corrine said. “What is your plan?” The maega seemed on the verge of losing her patience, fixing Tal with the stern look she used to curdle misbehavior.

Tal wasn’t sure what to say. She was in her last year at Eru School. Most of her peers, all the other Atnali included, had already been sent back home, their instruction deemed complete. Now they were left to the lot of Eru throughout Starla: Struggle to survive on the small preserves leftover from the vast territories their people once called home, usually the least fertile or valuable land. It was a hard life. The prospects for most Eru were dismal, outside the rare few who ran a store like Mother or lucked into an apprenticeship for a vital trade like smithing or carpentry.

A few alternatives did exist, such as working on local plantations run by powerful Starlan families or seeking fortune up north in Starla City, where jobs in the makeries were said to grow as numerous as the fruit on the plum trees outside Tal’s hometown. Some said the Starlans weren’t as harsh in the capital, but few Atnali ever came back. The last option was to join the Starlan army—be sent overseas to protect “Starlan interests” or end up patrolling lands elsewhere in Starla, rounding up poor, desperate bandits and quashing rebellions by people not so different from her own.

The only person she remembered choosing the army was Uncle Wulin, though his choice could hardly be called that. He got drunk one night in Brasor during a Tiwokan, woke up in the army. It was ten years before he managed to get out and that was only because a stray forcebolt from a wand shattered his right leg. Afterward, he went to live alone in a shack up on the edge of the mountain forests, only coming to town to collect his army pension and buy supplies. His deerskins and breath always reeked of whiskey but he was kind to Tal, even taught her how to shield herself behind her horse while riding. “One of the old ways,” he had said. “How we could fire arrows without being shot. The Ikkina taught us the trick.”

Truth be told Tal had been mulling her options for more than a year. Only one appealed to her. She cleared her throat, pitching her voice for just the right level of deference. “I thought I might work for a merchant house, passing among the Eru settlements, securing goods and making contracts.” She’d seen how Starlans treated Mother and other Eru merchants, overcharging for goods, failing to make promised deliveries, refusing even to do business with them. If she could find a way to forge alliances among Eru merchants and suppliers, maybe she could make things better for her people, then they could get ahead, buy back some of the stolen lands so more could stay near their homes and families.

Maega Corrine gave a momentary smile that twisted into a frown. “Yes, family and community *are* important. But a woman with your talents might be able to do more . . . ” The maega waved her hand about the store. “ . . . more for your people. For your *country*. For All-Mother Illu. Have you considered joining the army?”

Tal clasped her hands together. The teachers always talked about what a tremendous honor it was for accomplished students to serve as examples to their communities, but they never mentioned joining the army being the best way to do this. Tal feigned confusion. “Maega Corrine, I don’t think the army is for me. I don’t see earning glory in battle as my place.”

The maega came up and squeezed Tal’s arm in a gesture meant to reassure. “Nor should you. Your talents would be wasted in the field as surely as they would as a shopkeeper or merchant’s agent.” The maega stepped away, looking out the window. “In the army, you could be a quartermastra. Your business sense would help keep the army provisioned. But there’s more to it. Sometimes it is the quartermastra who keeps the peace, both within her company and with local communities.” The maega turned back, favoring Tal with a toothy smile. “I have no illusions. My people and their prejudices can

be cruel. Yet a wise quartermastra can stay the hand of an ill-tempered commander, save local Eru from much sorrow.”

“I don’t know,” Tal said. “Mother wants me around to help with the store.” Tal glanced about, trying to find a way to avoid what the maega seemed to want. Mother was dusting containers behind the counter. A heavy cart rolled by outside, its wheels creaking. A cloud obscured the sunlight coming in through the windows.

The maega moved to a shelf, picking up one of the navy-bean bags and setting it down askew. “With the contacts you build as a quartermastra, you could tap suppliers your family couldn’t hope to reach otherwise. You might even blaze a path leading to that dream of helping your people. And maybe there’s something we can do. Find someone to help perhaps?”

Tal tried to nod in agreement but couldn’t bring herself to. She didn’t want to leave her people, least of all for the army. There was a stigma to joining the army. It was seen as a betrayal. Most never came back, too ashamed to face the people. It was one thing to struggle under Starlan rule, another to join it.

The maega moved to another shelf. Tapping her fingernails against the wood, she stared at Tal over her shoulder, eyes narrowed slightly. “Your family has a land grant where you grow produce?”

Tal nodded slowly.

The maega’s fingers clicked against the shelf. *Tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap*. “It’d be a shame if you *lost* that grant. It would make a difficult situation harder?” The maega smiled; it reminded Tal of light glinting off broken glass.

*This is how they get students to sign up.* Tal had wondered why clear-minded students who wanted nothing to do with the army suddenly enlisted. As things stood, she couldn’t let Mother’s position become any more uncertain than it was. *If the maega can rescind a land grant, what else might she be able to do with Mother’s*

*partners?* Tal couldn't let the shop come into jeopardy. It was everything to Mother.

Tal put her hands together, pressing down the surge of emotions playing within her, and bowed. "I think I see my duty, Maega Corrine. Thank you for coming all the way out here."

"Excellent," the maega said. "I just so happen to have a recruitment letter." She reached into a satchel at her hip and produced a folded piece of parchment. "Look it over and sign when you're ready. I'm staying at the New Promise Inn just off the preserve. You can leave it with the innkeep."

"Yes, maega," Tal said, taking the parchment. Tal's body felt light, as if she might settle to the ground like a fallen leaf or be swept up in a gust. New Promise Inn was where drunks went for alcohol because it was banned on the preserve. Tal had gone there once out of curiosity, seen an Atnali woman passed out against the side of the building. The woman had an empty whiskey bottle on the ground at her side and her arm covered her face. Even now Tal could remember the whistling sound of the woman's snoring.

"I'll see you back at Eru School, child," the maega said. Then she turned and walked down the aisle, stopping to clutch at the shawl she'd examined before, a little laugh escaping her lips.

Tal stared at the parchment in her hands, not bothering to look up as the bell on the door gave a little choked sound. When the maega walked out, she took with her Tal's chance at freedom, setting the course that brought Tal to Harmony.

## 4

THE CAMP WAS ALIVE with activity when Tal returned. Word of the murders had spread among the soldiers, drawing them to the cookfires like a flurry of moths. This saved Tal the trouble of rounding everyone up to relay the Captain's orders, and once this chore was done, she roused Jereo and went to her tent.

"Jereo," Tal said, closing the tent flaps and lighting a lamp. "I know one of the murdered women."

"That's not good, QM."

"Keep your voice down," Tal said, already regretting revealing this to Jereo. He was young, maybe twenty. As with many young men, he struggled to control his emotions, which was why he wouldn't have been her first choice for assistant—nor her third. But keeping her people had proven difficult as the Captain kept finding reasons to ship them out. Mayla Asan, the assistant Tal had worked with for two years before Harmony, was reassigned within three weeks of arrival. According to the Captain's dispatch to regional, Asan was insubordinate, though no incident report was ever filed. Tal suspected the Captain didn't want Tal to get comfortable, cycling out her choices for assistant to send a message. Two more assistants came and went before Tal decided to go with Jereo, who was already in the company, a cousin of a friend, untrained and untested.

So far the Captain hadn't reassigned him. She probably thought having a man for an assistant was a proper insult for her Eru quartermastra. He'd lasted almost a month and wasn't completely incompetent.

"I need you to do something," Tal said after taking a seat at her worktable. "Find Merego. Tell him the Starlans are sending Kanari



and I need to speak with our friend. He'll know what to do."

"Of course—wait, Kanari? Here?" Jereo stiffened, glancing over his shoulder, as if the Kanari might appear right behind him.

"Not now. Soon." How the boy had managed to avoid reprimands every other day with a face so quick to emotion was a mystery.

"Oh," Jereo said.

Tal couldn't fault him too much. Among Eru even the mention of Kanari was distressing. Starla said the Kanari merely investigated crimes involving magic and were only trained in defensive magics, but to her people their arrival in a community usually foreshadowed someone being taken away under suspicion of spirit magic—and lost to the people forever. All the same, she wished Jereo would control his emotions better.

"How many did they take from your hometown?" Tal said, watching unease crease his face.

"Two. One was my uncle," Jereo said, "a woodcarver. Made me a quail." He put his hand up over his head, imitating a quail's flopping top-knot feather. "You know, the birds with the funny feather. I used to love watching them scratch in the shrubs beyond the edge of my village."

Tal bit her lip to keep from smiling. She wished she could move on from fear as easily as Jereo. In her hometown Kanari had taken three that she could remember, including a cousin, Mylon. He loved to collect wildflowers, weaving them into the baskets he made.

"Damned Omaka," Jereo said, bringing his right fist down into his left palm. "My ma always said it was only a matter of time before they broke bad. The wealth they have, how they treat the rest of us Eru, like they're better than us. Like they're Starlans."

“We don’t know it was an Omaka,” Tal said. She tapped her finger on a letter atop her table. She didn’t want to open it in front of Jereo. Even letting him know about her connection to Merego was a risk—but not as much as having him go directly to Isa Ilo in Harmony. Then Jereo would know who Tal’s Starlan agent in town was—and that could lead the Captain to discover Tal was trying to set up a meeting tonight with Maasara Ohtaya of the Omaka.

“Who else could be behind the murders?” Jereo said. “No other Eru would think to do something like this.”

Tal wasn’t so sure. Every Eru nation had reason to hate the Starlans. Each had a story rife with suffering, displacement and exploitation. It was true many of the Omaka came across as arrogant, wearing rich clothing and building absurd mansions in the style of the Starlans.

To Tal this was understandable. Before the coppa trade the Omaka had suffered the same fate as most other Eru: lands taken, people starving. The money from the coppa changed that somewhat, though the Omaka still weren’t free. Every member of the nation had a Starlan guardian holding most of their wealth from the coppa trade in a trust. “To guide our Omaka friends, teach them to manage their prosperity responsibly and steer them away from immorality and intemperance,” was how Mayor Sifun put it during an address last month, echoing what Starlans had likely been saying for ten years.

“Things are going to get tough,” Tal said. “For the Omaka and other Eru. I don’t see how this serves the Omaka. Three dead matrons aren’t going to make up for the last fifty years. If anything, the guardians will be more controlling.”

Jereo tapped a finger against his nose. “Who’s to say what an Omaka thinks? Maybe the wealth went to their heads?”

“I guess—” A pocket watch on Tal’s table rattled, letting loose a series of loud clicks.

“Time to earn your keep,” Jereo said, going over and lifting the tent flap, giving her his best mock smile.

“Not sure this is what I envisioned when I signed up,” Tal said, picking up the pocket watch and rising from her chair. “They should’ve warned us about commanders like the Captain.”

“You’ll do fine,” Jereo said. “You’ve already outlasted every other Eru quartermaster.”

Tal doused the lamp and led the way out. Three steps down the path she halted. “Oh, I forgot something,” she said, waving Jereo off. She went back into her tent and relit the lamp, sitting down and opening the letter.

As she read, she let out a sigh and looked up at the ceiling. *Could I just catch one break?* She slipped the letter into her pocket. There was still a chance for her plan. She could feel it. One of Mother’s sayings came to mind, something she liked to say after a bad harvest or when a “partner” threatened to cut their supply of needed goods. “We can’t let it get the best of us. As long as there’s a sunrise to see, there’s hope to hold.”

Back outside Tal was tempted to head straight for the Captain’s tent but stopped instead. Soldiers were talking around a cookfire not far away. Getting a sense of how the company was doing was important to her work, so she moved into the shadows beside her tent, trying to pick up on the conversation.

“Got my new *Starlan Seeker*,” Arnar Melkin said, brandishing a magazine. He was sitting in a camp chair near the fire with other soldiers in chairs or on tree-stump blocks, eating stew from bowls or just staring into the fire.

“Anything good?” Oseli Pela said. She was an Eru woman, dark brown skin the color of mahogany wood, her black hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head. Despite the night chill, she wore no shirt sleeves.

“There’s a story about Anya Kennit, the maega explorer.” Melkin flipped the magazine open. “She took a ship along the shores of Darna. Says the island is still smoking in the interior. Took a skiff within a hundred yards but her crew, those who weren’t maega or dweoma, dropped to the deck, flopping about like sparred fish.”

He paused a moment, eyeing the others, likely to see if he had his audience’s attention. Melkin was a big man, built like a boulder and loved telling stories. “One started screaming. Kennit had to lash the poor fellow to the mast, set the sail herself to get back to the waiting ship.”

“I guess we can’t send you Starlans back where you came from,” Ceregoa Biyan said, smiling at Melkin.

“Nope. A thousand years and the island’s still mad.”

Every student in Eru School had heard the story of Darna’s Doom, how the island the Starlans came from had gone wild, earthquakes and volcanoes tearing it apart, wild magics driving the people mad.

As the survivors fled toward the coast, a maega, Isa Cerga, had a vision from All-Mother Illu of a magic to shield the people until they could flee to a promised land.

Thus began the Starlan invasion, the refugees from Darna coming to the Eru Peninsula. After founding Starla City, they spread south in a conquest spanning centuries. At first they came in small numbers, speaking of sharing the land while proclaiming the benefits of trade. But when they couldn’t get the best lands or if their needs meant disrupting important places of the local Eru people, skirmishes and war broke out. The Eru people resisted, fighting back, but the Starlans came in ever-increasing numbers, wielding powerful magics the Eru had never seen before.

Even then, the Eru defied the Starlans as best they could, often leading the Starlan authorities to seek peace. But Starlan settlers

would then break that peace, setting off fresh violence, the cycle continuing until the Starlans had most of the land and the Eru were relegated to small preserves.

It had grown quiet around the campfire. Then Pela spoke, “Did the Synod ever find out what caused it?”

“Not that they told anyone,” Melkin said. “People up in Starla City always say Darna was beautiful. Perfect. A milk-and-honey land.”

“Good job fucking it up,” Biyan said. The others laughed.

If it was anyone other than Melkin, the conversation would be very different. Few Starlans had anything to do with their Eru comrades, fearing censure from their fellow Starlans for being too friendly toward Eru, for not “keeping to their own.” What’s more, most Starlans didn’t take kindly to anything approaching criticism of Starla or Starlans. But Melkin was different, unafraid of being seen among Eru. He told Tal once, “I can barely stand the way my people act. Always thinking Illu’s light shines for them and them alone, then telling me who I can and can’t socialize with. Makes it hard to get comfortable. You Eru are a better sort.”

Despite Melkin’s sympathies, Tal wished they’d be more discreet. A third of the company was Starlan and all it took was the wrong person walking by for the Captain to have the whole lot of them reassigned before their stews grew cold.

“It wasn’t the Starlans’ fault,” Pela said, reaching up to her neck, where a starburst pendant sat on a string of prayer beads. “Du’kel, the Shadow Lord, called forth darkness and madness, tainting the land. Yet in his blindness he didn’t see how he served the will of All-Mother Illu, bringing the faithful to the promised land.”

“You Waylighters blame Du’kel for everything,” Biyan said, shaking his head and putting a boot on one of the smooth stones at the fire’s edge. “From the way you talk, I’d think there was one of

them Du'kel-worshipping Skaedas behind every bush and bramble. Though you find time to blame us Eru when it suits you."

"Most Waylighters aren't as touchy as Pela here," Melkin said, leaning back in his chair, "but talk like that'll get you stuck on patrol up in the Falanin Mountains guarding mining shipments. Even if it is true." He looked over at two Eru women, dweomas, who'd been silent so far. They didn't seem all that interested in the conversation. One had turquoise beads in her hair and was oiling her wand; the other had tattoos running up her arms and was polishing a faceted yellow dwimstone crystal the size of a blue jay's egg.

Before joining the army, Tal hadn't known a dweoma from a maega, let alone seen a wand or dwimstone. But during her army training, she learned there were two forms of Starlan magic.

Maega magic was rarer and produced more potent magics; only about five in a hundred could work it. Those with maega magic drew directly on the power of All-Mother Illu through what the Starlans called the flow, directing these energies into a sigil, a symbol that gave shape and form to magic. Using the energy of the flow and the focus of a sigil, maegas could create makings, the actual magic they brought into the world—be it a burst of light like the sun, a blast of air as solid as an invisible wall or a raging ball of living fire.

Dweoma magic was more common—perhaps one in five could use it. Though it worked much the same as maega magic, the makings were on a smaller scale because dweomas couldn't draw directly on All-Mother Illu and the flow. Instead, they needed something that could hold a charge with energy from the flow, like dwimstone crystals or coppa fabric. With such a source, a dweoma could set a sigil and bring forth less spectacular but still very useful makings.

Tal turned her attention away from the dweomas, listening to the fire crackle and remembering how hard it had been to learn dweoma magic. At her first lesson the trainer had drawn the sigil for

a light charm, a making that would cause an object to glow, giving off enough light to see in the dark. “In time the sigil will speak to you, reveal its name as it were,” the trainer had said. “Usually when this happens, you will understand the sigil and what it does, as well as the language of magic, the divine words of All-Mother Illu. It is through her will that the gift of magic will come to you.”

Tal wasn't sure what all that meant but for days and then weeks she stared at the same sigil, sketched in the dirt, looking more like a child's scrawling of circles, hearts and curlicues than some symbol of otherworldly power. After a few minutes a dull pain would press against the back of her eyes but no celestial spirit spoke—that is until the pain gave way to whispers, the sigil seeming to flutter and jerk. If losing her mind was part of learning the language of All-Mother Illu and the secrets of her magic, Tal didn't want anything to do with them.

After a few days Tal decided to tell the trainer about the pain and the whispers. The trainer made a noise in her throat and gave Tal a look as if she were explaining the sky was blue and wind came out of the west. “Don't worry, child. Just keep trying.”

Since her first days at Eru School, Tal always worried about disappointing her teachers; they had this way of seeming displeased, even when Tal was right. But Tal didn't know if she was doing something wrong, didn't know what the whispers meant. In the end she did as the trainer said and kept at it.

A week passed and the whispers became mutters. Hoping to keep her sanity, Tal started parroting the mutters but this only made it worse. Whatever was speaking seemed to be trying to have a conversation with her. Tal was sure she was stumbling off the last crag into madness; and yet she didn't say anything, not wanting to disappoint her trainer. When fragments of the sigil started appearing at the edges of her vision even when she wasn't practicing, she had to

do something, mustering up her courage and returning to the trainer.

“You’re ready,” the woman said. “Reach out to the dwimstone in your wand. Feed its energies into the sigil and bring the making into being.” The trainer made it seem easy, as if Tal was on the cusp of a breakthrough, but it was another two weeks of grimaces and cryptic comments before Tal finally managed it, calling up the sigil, tying it to the energies of the dwimstone and drawing the making into the world. She’ll never forget the feeling, the warmth and pressure of the magic as the making crossed over from everywhere and nowhere. She’d never felt so proud as when the glow sprang to life at the tip of her wand. Even the trainer’s little “it’s about time” couldn’t wipe the smile from her face. She’d learned dweoma magic.

Tal wondered if these dweomas had struggled as much as she had. Around the campfire no one was speaking. Melkin picked up a bowl lying near the leg of his chair, spooning some stew into his mouth. Pela undid the clasp on her necklace, wrapping the string of howlite beads around her hand and bowing her head in a whispered prayer.

Beyond the circle of light, others had already turned in for the night, their blanketed feet sticking out from one-person tents running in neat lines. A horse whickered from a distant picket as stars glimmered in the sky.

A soldier sauntered out of the dark, sliding into an empty chair. He was thin and slouched, his woolly black hair cut short. Tal couldn’t suppress the smile that came to her lips.

“Why’s everyone so glum?” the man said. “Did you let Pela make the stew?”

The others looked up. Biyan broke into a grin, filling a bowl and handing it to the man. “Only one way to find out, Merego.”



“Joke all you like,” Pela said, “the All-Mother can’t be pleased. Three of her chosen were taken. Whether Du’kel is behind it or not, it serves his purposes, bringing discord and fear into the world.”

“I bet it was one of the Omaka elders,” one of the dweomas said. “They’re always going on about how much has been lost. Who else would know such spirit magic?”

“My money is on Starlans,” Biyan said. “Someone wants to get their hands on some Omaka guardianships, get a taste of that easy money.”

“Nah. It’s a youngling, proud and fashionable,” Melkin said. “They learned spirit magic from an elder who died. Now they’ve bucked up the courage to do something and no one’s around to help them see good from bad.”

“Of course you’d suspect an Omaka,” Biyan said, pressing his lips together. “You can’t see what’s plain as the nose on your face. Starlans want to swoop in and take the dead matrons’ wards. It’s about money. It’s always about money with you Starlans. The Omaka are peaceful. They aren’t savage Ikkina reavers.”

Pela and Merego had been staring at the fire but looked up at the mention of Ikkina. They were from the north but knew about the legendary horse raiders who’d ravaged the other nations of the Southern Reaches until the Starlans came and drove them into the Cursekin Badlands. Biyan hadn’t looked up, continuing to stare into the fire. He was Kekosi. His people knew the Ikkina firsthand, had suffered under their depredations, even to this day, as some of their settlements were close to the border.

Merego pulled a tiny box from a pouch on his belt and opened it, removing a few pinches of salt and spreading them over his stew. “Whoever is at fault, it’ll be hard on Eru, especially those in Harmony.”

Biyan made a noise at the back of his throat, the muscles on his jawline tightening as he threw a glare at Melkin.

Merego set his bowl down with a clatter. “You know, I could understand why an Omaka might kill those matrons. I was playing gahnee the other night and heard a couple Omaka talking. Two of their people have died suspiciously in the last few months. The most recent was that Sulin Ikoni boy, not even a month ago. Married a Starlan a few months back. Then went missing. They found him up a gulch in the foothills.”

Pela shook her head. “This wealth is corrupting. Illu can’t be pleased.” Her fingers tightened on her prayer beads.

Merego stood up, took a stick and prodded the fire. “They say he was drunk. How’d he get all the way out in the wilderness if he was drunk? Most of these townie Omaka never leave Harmony. I heard a woman say he was at one of them Starlan saloons and left with his wife and brother-in-law. Why’d they come back alive and he didn’t? The coppa-harvest allotment.”

The wind picked up, guttering the fire for a moment, creaking the nearby gray pines. “It’s all bullshit,” Biyan said, getting up and walking away down a row of tents. The others fell quiet, staring into the fire.

“Tal,” a woman spoke near Tal’s ear. She started, stepping back to face a tall, thin matron, pale skin, red-brown hair and deep-brown eyes just visible in the firelight; the woman wore a blouse and pen skirt, both silver with blue floral embroidery. She had a sleeveless charcoal-colored vest and matching riding boots. The combination of boots and skirt made Tal smile. Who would wear such a skirt while riding? Despite the impractical combination, Tal appreciated the fine cut to the woman’s clothing, how it complimented her shape—nor could Tal help noticing the hesitancy to the woman’s expression, so strange on a Starlan face.

The woman scanned the paths between the tents, pulling Tal further into the darkness. Once there she drew Tal close, squeezing her hands and reaching up to lightly cup Tal's cheek before kissing her on the lips. The woman smelled of jasmine, lips sweet as ripe blackberries. Tal returned the kiss, losing herself for a few moments.

"Amlina," Tal whispered after pulling away, trying to sound more shocked than she felt. "If someone saw that and told the Captain, I'd be on the next coach to regional with a reprimand on my record."

"I'm sorry," Amlina said, blushing strong enough to be seen among the shadows. "Those matrons, murdered. I can't get it out of my head. I heard one of my guards say the matrons' lockboxes had been opened, their valuables taken." She looked around, as if someone would appear and rob her. "To think someone would dare kill matrons—and for money. It makes me sick."

Tal gave Amlina's arm a squeeze. Tal doubted money as the main motive. Why would someone take the pains to display the bodies before the sheriff house and scrawl *Vengeance* on the ground if the killings were just to raid some matrons' lockboxes? She suspected the real reason had more to do with Starla but didn't think Amlina would understand. Most Starlans couldn't imagine anyone rejecting their way of life and the prosperity it offered.

"The Captain will see to your safety," Tal said. "She's likely increased your guard." Tal surveyed the camp. "Which reminds me, where *is* your guard?"

Amlina gave a playful smile. "Outside my tent. I told them I'm running a sensitive experiment and *not to be interrupted*." Amlina used her serious matron voice and expression for the last few words. Tal could almost believe she was just another matron if she only spoke like that. Then a grin returned and broke the illusion, Amlina wrapping Tal in an embrace. "I wanted to see you. I was getting restless all cooped up in my lab."

Tal gave Amlina a long, sweet kiss. The beaming pride Amlina felt at this stolen moment was adorable. Tal had grown up among the hard, no-nonsense matrons Starla sent out into the frontiers to tame the land and subdue its people, women who rarely spoke a kind word and never shared an honest emotion around Eru. Amlina was different. How she managed to convince the regional authorities to let her come out here was a blacksmith's puzzle Tal couldn't figure out. Maybe they didn't expect her to have much contact with Eru. Whatever the reason, Tal was glad Amlina was here; it felt good having her so close—even if it was dangerous and set a tension pressing at the base of Tal's skull. She'd had this feeling before, a foreboding. Merego's words about the Omaka boy came back to her, stoking fresh fears of what the murders would mean for Eru.

"Amlina, I'll come to you after I meet with the Captain." Tal wrapped her hand around Amlina's waist, pulling them together, side by side, leaning her head against Amlina's shoulder.

"Don't make me wait," Amlina said, her lips forming into a wicked smile. The matron gave a final squeeze before stepping onto the path to her lab. She flashed one last look before disappearing into the dark.

Tal waited for her own smile to fade, taking a few breaths to gather herself before heading for the Captain's tent.

## 5

TAL'S NIGHT WAS PROVING a busy one. The meeting with the Captain went as expected, letters and requests to send off to regional, discussions on patrol schedules and travel rations, insinuations about the unsuitability of Eru for army service. The time with Amlina afterward was a welcome relief. Tal would've loved to stay there or go back to her cot and sleep this miserable night away, but there was one last thing she needed to do. So she made her way through the picket lines on the north edge of camp, calming the horses with whispered words she'd learned in one of her Ravens dreams.

These dreams had been with her since she was a little girl. She would move through fog-shrouded forests like the ones not far from her home. A Raven alone or two together would appear, on a branch above an overgrown deer trail, out among rocks in a rushing stream, up on a mossy pillar of rock in the center of a meadow. They would watch her, heads raised, croaking and clicking their beaks.

For a few years nothing seemed to happen; after each episode she vaguely remembered having dreamed. But as the years passed, the Ravens' calls started to make a sort of sense. Not quite words. More thoughts. Sendings. A language akin to the Illu sigils, incomprehensible until suddenly becoming clear—and once understood she could speak the thought-language too.

The Ravens' sendings spoke of plants and animals, large and small, living in the forest, the role each played in the balance of life, how they helped hold the world together like bands on a barrel. After a handful of years, Tal started picking up the thoughts of other animals in the waking world, snippets to start, but growing until she could communicate somewhat, though she was most successful with birds and horses.

Tal had asked Mother about it. She squeezed Tal's arm in a iron grip, a wild expression on her face. "Don't tell anyone, my sweet. The Starlans will think you use spirit magic. They'll take you away."

For a moment Tal thought Mother might hurt her, then Mother's face brightened. "It's a gift of the gods, this speaking. Very rare." Tal never told anyone else but couldn't resist using the gift from time to time, in moments like this, calming horses so she could sneak out of camp.

In the field beyond camp, Tal paused to listen to the night sounds. She heard a rustle and caught the glint of eyes as a raccoon slinked among the thick roots of a nearby sycamore tree. The wind worked the branches, gently shaking the leaves. She made her way north toward the Omaka Preserve by ways she'd come a dozen times before, always at night.

A raven's call sent a shiver through her, a reminder of how she used to love such night rangings, echoes of those Ravens dreams and the secrets she learned there. For years she thought those dreams meant something, that the Raven gods had returned to serve as sentinels, watching over her people and offering help. She even dared to hope she might be a ronganta, destined to serve their will in the wide world. This child's fantasy lived in her heart until a night in a woodland like this.

\* \* \*

A full moon stood high in the dark heavens, blanketing the world in pale pearlescent light. The naturalist teacher, usually sober and distant in his manner, led Tal and the rest of his charges—children from a handful of Eru Nations across the Southern Reaches—into the wilderness outside Brasor.

They walked along a forest path, the teacher pointing out many plants and signs of animals' passing, giving brief explanations. These were not stories. There was no mention of how the plants and animals lived in communion with the people, how Bobcat taught

them to hunt rabbits and snakes, how Hawk led them to water during dry times.

Instead, the teacher talked about plants and animals Starlans used to make things they valued. At one point they stopped at a tree, its trunk covered in bright green moss. “This is a bigleaf maple, its wood is used for flooring, turned into furniture in the makeries of Starla.” He pointed out bite marks on a gnawed stump, explaining the tree had been brought down by a beaver before gesturing to markings on the ground where the beaver dragged the tree into a nearby stream. “Beavers have lovely hides, made into fashionable garments for the powerful in Starla City. Its scent glands are used in perfumes. A most valuable animal.”

Tal wondered how many beavers were killed each year to make hats and perfumes. She’d once seen their hides stacked up outside a merchant house in Brador, dozens and dozens of skins, an open grave just sitting there on the side of the road. Mother said beavers were an important part of the forests and waterways around their home. “Don’t disturb beavers in their lodges. The dams they build hold back water, keeping our waterways flowing into late summer and autumn when water would otherwise be scarce.”

The teacher moved on a few yards, squatting off the path. “Here,” he said, pointing to a purplish flower with a delicate bowl shape beneath a fan of petals. “This is a fairy slipper. Last year it was all the rage for floral arrangements in Starla City. Florists couldn’t get enough of these lovelies.” He let his students come forward in twos and threes to admire a stand of six or seven flowers bunched together. “The beauty of nature is astounding, Illu’s gifts constantly amaze us. You too have much to offer Starla.”

The man beamed as he looked over his charges; many returned nervous grins. Tal found it hard to feel proud being compared to flowers harvested for their beauty. All she felt was queasy, as if someone had flipped her stomach over with a shovel—maybe the

same person who killed hundreds, thousands of fairy slippers for the rich in Starla City.

Half an hour into the ranging, they heard croaks Tal knew well. A raven was close.

“Ahh, this way, students, there’s something you should see.” He led them down a side trail, no more than a trampled depression in the grass. They came into a clearing ringed by blue oaks, arms stretched wide as if holding out the night. The teacher pointed to a tree on the far side. On a lower branch sat a raven, eyeing them as it cracked a snail against the hard bark of the tree. “See that,” he said, shuffling through the grass until he was just below the bird, turning back to his students. “Some of you are Atnali, yes? You believe ravens are sacred, if you hurt them, it will bring bad luck, the great numen of your people will seek retribution.” He paused, letting his charges recall the old stories.

Most Eru nations had animal protectors, numen gods their people had compacted with. For the Enarodi, it was Badger, the Nuisan, Salamander. Tal’s people, the Atnali, held a covenant with and worshipped the Ravens, Ghaalra and Aalgar, a mated pair, though it was never clear which was female and which male.

The Ravens did more than just protect the Atnali. The stories spoke of them as tricksters, wily and resourceful, ever watchful. One of Tal’s favorite tales was of Squirrel scouring the lands, gathering up all the acorns until no new oak trees grew. The forests and other animals suffered. One day Aalgar followed Squirrel and when she was away, went in and stole the acorn hoard. As Aalgar flew away, acorns fell from their talons, and where the acorns fell, oaklings took root. In time the forests grew back healthy and strong, reaching even farther than before.

There was also the story of Ghaalra, jealous of vane Possum’s beautiful furry tail. The solstice dance was approaching and Possum wanted to look his best. Ghaalra offered to preen Possum’s tail but



instead plucked it bald. Poor Possum didn't notice until others laughed at him during the dance. There were so many stories of the Ravens yet beneath their tricks and deceptions, they served the balance—took from some, gave to a few—yet always helped others see what they needed to see.

These stories winged in and out of Tal's mind while the other children watched the teacher, whispering to one another. "What's he going to do?" "Why are we here?" Tal had a bad feeling, a pressure rattling her like the rumble of a dwimrail train roaring past.

The teacher unbuttoned his coat. "If the Ravens exist, would they not punish me for this?" He threw open his coat. Lining the inside were shiny black feathers with bits of bone worked in, as well as talons and beaks, darkened by age. She took a step back, the shapes of ravens seeming to come alive, as if trying to rise out of the boneyard lining the coat.

If the sight of the coat was shocking, the teacher's face was even more so. In the moonlight his smile was transformed into a feral leer. He flourished one hand in front of the faded and torn feathers as if this was a showcase at a Tiwokan. Tal struggled for breath, her body locked in place.

The other children watched her, some furtively, fearful they'd catch her eye, others boldly. They all knew she was Atnali, that her people didn't stand in a place of honor among the nations of the Southern Reaches.

When the grasping fingers of the Starlan invasion first reached the Southern Reaches three centuries ago, scouts and prospectors and traders, her people and the Ikkina traded with them, offering bison, deer and elk hides and meat for metal tools and horses. Then the Starlans found silver in the Falanin Mountains and pressed the Atnali and Ikkina to bring captives to work the mines. So it was that the Atnali had helped weaken the other nations, Enarodi, Kekosi, Semat and Omaka, raiding their homesteads year after year for

captives, until the Starlan army and settlers came, pushing the Eru peoples off the lands they had belonged to for ages beyond count.

In the end, the Atnali and Ikkina paid their own price in misery when the Starlans turned on them, hunting them for decades after the other nations had surrendered. It didn't matter that most Atnali had died and those who lived were weak and starving. It didn't matter that the Atnali were eventually brought under Starlan rule, relegated to a small island preserve among the vast grasslands they had once roamed. No, the other nations remembered what the Atnali had done to them, remembered the Atnali betrayed the Ikkina in the end. They whispered about how the Atnali were allowed to keep a small paddock of bison, given a slightly larger preserve than the other Eru. These benefits didn't keep Tal's people from struggling to survive like all the other nations—and were likely meant to set the Atnali apart, make sure the other nations remembered the betrayal.

Tal saw the old hatreds in those who stared boldly at her. Rather than offer pity at this sacrilege, those faces brightened with satisfaction, the desecration sewn into the teacher's coat a just reward for what the Atnali had done.

Tal's gaze fell, her eyes squeezed shut. She didn't want the others to see her cry, see the tears shining at the corners of her eyes. Every child in Eru School faced moments like these, moments of judgment and insult, when they were made to feel shame at the hands of their Starlan instructors or children from other nations. These experiences served to divide the Eru peoples, adding fresh wounds to old enmities, opening chasms between them, the distance obscuring how much they had in common.

Looking back now Tal could see the ruthless sense in it. The Starlans didn't want the nations to discover how much they shared, similar histories of hardship, the year beef rations were stolen or arrived rotten, the spring a late frost stunted or killed their crops. Because if they did, they might close the gulf that held them apart

with bonds of friendship, might work together to improve the lot of all Eru.

Yet in that moment all Tal could do, spellbound by the sight of the hideous coat, was play the teacher's question over and over in her head. "If the Ravens exist, would they not punish me for this?" The horror made her head spin. She wanted to drop to the ground, cover her face and cry. But if she did, it would feed the satisfaction of those watching her, give this Starlan what he wanted. She couldn't let them have that—and so she stared at the ground and prayed the moment would pass.

"The answer is simple, children," the man said, closing his coat with a laugh. "The Raven gods never existed. It was all a lie to hold you in bondage to spirit maegas, the rongantas."

Tal peered up at the raven, willing it to prove the Starlan's words false, but it just blinked at her, blind to the unshed tears in her eyes, deaf to the questions burning in her heart. Why did it do nothing? And why hadn't the Ravens protected the people and the lands when the Starlans came?

\* \* \*

A twig snapped, driving Tal's hand to the wand on her belt. She had it out, turning toward a shadow coming out of the woods—only to drop it back in its holster when she saw who it was. Maasara Ohtaya of the Omaka.

He wore browns and grays, the colors of the woods, a chain of beads wrapped around his neck and a simple ribbon of shiny black snaking through his long, braided silver hair. His clothing was made of coppa fabric, smooth and dyed, not the cheap, coarse fibers well-to-do Starlan artisans wore in Harmony. Few outside the Omaka could afford to wear such rich attire, worth dozens of lumes. But his clothing wasn't the only thing noteworthy about him. Ohtaya was an old man, well into his seventies, and yet he still moved with a languid

surety. He also happened to be one of the few who still knew how to care for the coppa plants in the old ways.

As he stopped before her, she couldn't help but notice that his usual calm was gone. Dark rings circled his eyes, which had a glazed faraway look. The sight set an icy tingling of goosebumps across the skin on her left arm. It was like the wind slipped two fingers beneath her shirt and coat, brushing the back of that triceps. This feeling had been coming and going for days, especially strong after a horrible nightmare of blood and screaming last night, an echo of her memories from the Lightbound Rebellion.

"What now were you thinking?" Ohtaya said. "You had a look such on your face. I was fearing you heard someone, some Starlan soldier perhaps."

Tal rubbed the spot on her arm through her coat, trying to warm the flesh. "We're far from the patrols the Captain set." Tal pictured again the maps she'd seen in the Captain's tent; no patrols came this close to the Omaka Preserve. "I was thinking of the numen gods of my people. It's been centuries since we heard their call," Tal said. "Same as all the peoples. It's hard to keep faith in the Long Silence."

All the Eru spoke with sadness of what they called the Long Silence, when many of the spirit magics suddenly failed and the numen gods fell silent. The lorekeepers said it started some seven hundred years ago. Before then, the Starlan invasion had been gradual and halting, Eru resistance holding the Starlans at bay. Then the Long Silence came, the loss of the spirit magics and the despair at the people's prayers going unanswered weakened them, accelerating the Starlans' conquest until almost all the Eru were subject to the Starlans.

Ohtaya turned his head to the side. "It is hard staying true what we see our people suffer, hear the silence to the numen gods. But always we keep going. We are survivors." Like most from the older

Omaka generation, he came to the Starlan language as an adult, the smooth rhythms of his native tongue giving a comforting cadence to his speech but leaving his command of the Starlan language disjointed. He tried out a smile but it fell from his haggard face almost before it formed. He brought a hand to the side of his head, rubbing at his temple. "I am comforted in knowing the ancestors see us and our struggles. We must hope for a time to come."

"Hope for tomorrow is fine," Tal said, "but our struggles are real right now. Have you heard what happened in Harmony?"

"Your Starlan friend let me know when she came. It saddens me, the thought that violence has come among my people," Ohtaya said, bringing his second hand up to rub his other temple. "In the old days we knew peace. Sure, defenses we built against the Ikkina—and your kin. But the young. I no longer understand them." He dropped his hands, his shoulders slumping. "They do not come work the coppa. Too busy talking of the future, advancing the Omaka people and joining the progress the Starlans offer."

Ohtaya looked out across the moon-kissed lands to the south, the gentle hills rolling down to the flat valley below, the shining silver of Sumneko River twisting through its heart. The sight of Sumneko gave Tal a little shudder. She knew how important all that water was to life in this place, but she didn't swim well. Water that rose above her knees made her anxious—in spite of its beauty.

"I miss the ones what are gone, how it used to be," Ohtaya said. "Somedays I wake up, look over the lands when the fogs are thick, and it appears as in the old days. Then the fogs clear and I see what the Starlans have changed, the dried-out fields they've abandoned, Sumneko lower than in my memories."

Tal followed his gaze. Her people and their lands were farther north. They had been under Starlan rule for over one-hundred-fifty years. No Atnali alive remembered the days before the Starlans came, before the people were forced onto the preserve, told the old

ways were dead, that they needed to take a new road. Seeing Ohtaya, talking to him always reminded her of how much wisdom and knowledge her people had lost, much of the herb lore and many of the ceremonies, as well as the stories and important secrets of the land.

“I heard back from my agent in the east,” Tal said, revealing the edge of the letter in her coat pocket. “The coppa took root but lacked the magic.”

“They sang the song of growing?” Ohtaya said.

Tal nodded.

“I do not know how else to try,” Ohtaya said. “If we had a ronganta, they could speak of the ancestors . . . ”

“There must be something else. It feels so close,” Tal said. “Taking back control of the coppa, not being beholden to guardians. That would be a step in the right direction.”

“What with the murders, the Starlans will keep a closer watch on the coppa,” Ohtaya said. “I don’t know I will have access of the seed vault, not of a while.”

Tal had expected this. The red tally in her ledger grew, more debts threatening to bankrupt her plan. “If the murderers are found, the Starlans’ concerns might ease. If those involved are Omaka, would you want them brought to justice?” Tal thought again of Soriya’s little smile, Anashee’s grin.

“Yes, but not *Starlan* justice.” Anger flashed across Ohtaya’s face, like a distant crack of lightning coming and going so quickly she doubted it had ever been. She’d never seen Ohtaya angry before. Her arm tingled cold again and a sick feeling roiled in her belly.

She cleared her throat. “The Starlans are sure to investigate, the murders reek of magic. That means Kanari.” Her thoughts went back

to the Ravens dreams, her talent for speaking with animals. *How am I going to hide my spirit magic?*

“Will they bring trouble with your plan?”

“I don’t know,” Tal said. The image of Maega Corrine’s face rose in her mind. “I might need your help.”

“What have you in mind?”

“The murdered matrons,” Tal said. “I need to find out what business they were involved in, what dealings they had among your people. If you find out what they were up to, let me know.” *Maybe I can use the info to keep the Kanari focused elsewhere, away from me.*

“I will do this thing—”

There was a rustle in the bracken at the edge of the clearing. Tal’s hand fell to her wand. A squirrel skittered up the bark of a tree, chased by a gray wolf. The wolf growled and circled the tree, pawing the bark. It sniffed the tree then lifted its head, peering at Ohtaya and Tal, golden eyes gleaming in the darkness.

Ohtaya made a loud whistle, stepping forward and unhooking a thin wood club at his waist. Tal glanced down, pulling her wand from its holster. By the time she looked up, the wolf was gone.

“I thought the Starlans killed all the wolves clear to the Badlands?” Tal asked.

“They did,” Ohtaya said. “But in recent years wolves have been making their way across the border. Starlan farmers do a culling every few years what a pack or two tries to establish, coming over the Blood Hills.” He motioned off to the east. “The wolves the land sorely misses. Deer and elk grow numerous, eat of the saplings. The Starlans cut down entire groves. The forests no longer grow.”

Such problems arose elsewhere in the Southern Reaches. The Starlans would grant logging rights, decimating a forest, or local Eru

councils would offer bounties to hunters to thin out the deer and elk herds. These efforts rarely worked—and in some cases hunters would kill too many, leading to other imbalances.

“There, little friend,” Ohtaya said, reaching into a pouch at his waist and removing some seeds. He knelt down and set them on the ground in a broad leaf-shaped pattern, whispering some words in Omaka as he stepped back. The squirrel came down and nibbled the seeds.

“Will you be alright getting home?” Tal asked.

The old man watched the squirrel. “I should say the same. You have never known wolves by your lands.”

“I think I’ll manage. Wolves can’t be worse than matrons.”

Ohtaya chuckled, the sound washing the tension from Tal’s body. “You might be right.” He waved his arm in farewell. “Be well, Ch’kola of the Atnali.”

He turned and walked off into the shadows, heading for the foothills.

“And you, Ohtaya of the Omaka.” Tal waited a moment in the clearing, listening. She squeezed the dark leather handle to her wand, ran her other hand along its smooth light-brown wood, studded with two yellow dwimstones. After taking in the moonlight and shadows a moment longer, she made her way back to camp.



## 6

“ALL I DO is grind, grind. Damned coppa fibers, I stink of them.”

Tal lifted her head to find the speaker sitting at the bar of the *Field's Harvest* with another woman.

“They said to get away from home, my people were holding me back. But it wasn't that. There was no work. So here I am, lapdog to the Omaka, working *their* coppa. By Illu's light, Lalu.”

The speaker was tall, had a long neck and arms woven with muscle. The other woman, Lalu, was shorter, broader in the shoulders, but sinews also stood out across her shoulders and down the back of her arms. Both wore rough-spun shirts and leggings stained a greenish brown.

Tal could appreciate the woman's frustration. It was backbreaking to work in the coppa refineries, laying the plants out to dry, grinding up the lower-quality crop to make a mesh, collecting the finer fibers and transferring them between vats for the various treatments, all before packaging the coppa to be sent out to garment makers, upholsterers and other makeries four-hundred miles north in Starla City.

The two women leaned on each other, swaying slightly as they talked, drinking deeply from earthenware mugs that frothed with some hoppy liquor, the sharp smell of it carrying across the room despite the stink of the coppa refineries.

Tal ran her hand along the worn wood of her table as she looked around. The sun was just going down, only a bright band of orange left above the horizon, yet it still brightened the western side

of the dark room, shining through the grime caking the vaulted windows.

The barkeep was lighting oil lamps hanging from thick beams running between the rafters. A shout came from the back corner where four Eru stood, three hefting axes on their shoulders while the fourth threw at a target. A man and a woman sat in a corner, holding hands and smoking pipe weed, occasionally laughing and pointing at each other. The bright green smell of the pipe weed warred with the sharp odor of dried-out coppa soaked in bitter chemicals.

*No one here is a threat.* The thought came as Tal inspected the place with a soldier's eye. These were hardworking people that just wanted a place to relax. Tal wasn't so sure about their choice of tavern. She did appreciate the décor. The owner must be Enarodi since a number of lovely banners hung on the walls, depicting Badger showing people how to plant corn and worship the sun. Decorative plates sat out on shelves all over the room, depicting animals and plants. The bar also offered traditional Eru foods, stuffed acorn squash and roasted chiles. But the lighting was a little dark for Tal's taste and the place was far too hot with roaring fireplaces on opposite walls.

Not for the first time Tal regretted spending her evening here on the Captain's orders. "We need to ensure the matrons' murders don't embolden the unlawful, those who might break the peace." Tal hadn't heard of any Starlan soldiers being sent to Starlan bars, but for two nights now Eru soldiers had been stationed in Eru bars and taverns all over town, listening in, dealing with any trouble before it got started and reporting back.

Tal leaned forward and pulled out a notebook, opening to the page with her supply numbers. There was nothing to worry about here. Just Eru enjoying a moment to themselves, free from their troubles. Well, besides those two at the bar.

The tavern doors groaned. Tal glanced up, expecting Merego, but it was a woman on her way to the bar. Where was Merego? He was supposed to be here, had skipped out an hour ago, saying he needed to place some bets on the salea races. Tal didn't see what was so special about salea, why so many loved watching the large, flightless birds race. She'd heard the olumay down in the heart of the continent rode them as mounts. The birds were certainly big enough and beautiful too, the coloration of their faces striped in bands of white, green and brown. If she let him, Merego would go on for hours about them, mostly what made one better at racing than the next. "They've got to have big veins popping out along their legs, so they can get the blood pumping, rush up to speed and stay there."

One time Tal went with Merego to the salea races. The grace and speed of the animals were breathtaking. How someone could look at their legs and know which of eight was going to win—let alone bet on that hunch—was beyond her. It seemed foolhardy but Merego loved it, almost as much as playing cards.

All of his gambling worried Tal. Merego was dependable and tireless and had an easy manner, which made him great for meetings with contacts and delicate situations where his charm came in handy. But sometimes he burned through a month's pay in a day at the salea races or night around the gahnee table. It was good no one had a card game going. He'd probably get into a fight before the night's end.

"How could he do that?" the speaker at the bar asked Lalu, leaning on her arm. "His wife came right in while we were having dinner at Sparen's. His wife. I didn't even know he had a wife. Everyone glared at me like I'd stolen him. Now I'm all alone."

Lalu went still, her eyes locked on her drink. "You have me, Edri." Lalu reached out and hugged Edri.

They drank in silence, Lalu's arm around Edri. Another shout came from the axe throwers. Someone had scored a bull's-eye at five

paces. They were all stomping about and laughing. The hinges on the tavern door squawked again as a heavy-set man in a weathered gray poncho came in. He walked to the middle of the bar and ordered a whiskey sour. Tal could smell his cologne, vanilla and sandalwood. The man turned around, eyes meandering from table to table until his drink arrived.

A smile crept across Tal's face. Here were her people, just living. No need to keep their heads down or step aside for a matron. In places like this, on the preserves, in Starla City's Eru enclave, they could just be. The scene filled her with hope. Tal took a sip from her mug. The lati'asa, a traditional fermented corn drink, carried a slight bitter taste. The smell of the coppa refineries must get into everything here on the north side.

"I just want a family, kids. He promised me," the Edri woman muttered, staring down at the bar.

Lalu let her arm fall away, sipping from her mug and looking in the mirror above the bar. "He's Starlan," she said. "Did you think he was going to marry an Eru woman? Why do you keep going after these no-count Starlan men? You don't need them. Do you even want them?"

"The *Codex of Light* says—"

"I don't care about that Waylighter nonsense," Lalu said. She picked up Edri's hand. "I want you to be happy."

Edri ripped her hand away, almost losing her balance. "And I want something real." She stood up, stepping away from Lalu, grabbing the bar to steady herself. "Something with a future. I don't want to be working in some makery or refinery in twenty years . . . or starving back on the preserve."

Lalu rose, the abrupt movement sending her stool skittering across the floor, tipping on its legs before clattering on its side. "So I'm not real? *This* isn't real." She waved a hand between them. "If

you really wanted it to work with these Starlan men, wouldn't it have by now? You keep coming back to me. I can't take it!"

The two frowned at each other, plea and pain on their faces.

"Easy, sisters," the man in the poncho said, sidling up between them. "It might be the whiskey or the dust of the trail, but seeing you fight unseats my heart."

Tal was surprised to see silver streaks in his hair, the nimble way he carried his heavy frame suggesting a younger man. He whispered something to the women, too softly for Tal to hear. The tension fell from the women's bodies. "Come," the man said. "Let's have another drink and talk of good times. How did you first meet?"

Lalu and Edri stared at each other, eyes glistening to the point of tears. After a moment they did as the man suggested, recounting how they met at Eru School. Someone played a prank on Lalu and Edri was blamed. While the women told their story, the man fetched the stool Lalu had knocked over, setting it down for her.

"Your story reminds me of a friend. Illia Omia of the Lagali. She was wild. We had a strict teacher, wouldn't let anyone talk in class, always railed against our so-called 'backwards Eru beliefs.' One time she made the mistake of saying frogs weren't sacred, so Omia laced the teacher's oatmeal with secretions from a spined forest frog. It took a while for the poison to work. The teacher was giving a lesson when her mouth went numb," the man said, putting out his tongue slightly and touching his lips and jaw, mimicking the way the teacher must have reacted, eyes bulging with fear. "Then she passed out. Poor woman was out for two hours. Omia told the class a frog numen had come to exact revenge. That was the first time any of us got to talk in that class, the first time I spoke to Omia. By the time the teacher woke up, we were fast friends."

The two women laughed. "What happened to Omia afterward?" Lalu said.

“She got a serious whipping and a month cleaning the lavatories—and we all got a generous helping of lectures about ‘showing proper respect to matrons.’” The man grinned. “I also learned everything I needed to know about Omia right there. Anyone willing to stand up for the old ways and face the Starlans and their severe punishments is alright by me.”

“She’s lucky that’s all she got,” Edri said.

“Illu’s truth. I hear they sometimes brand kids for doing less these days,” the man said. “Let’s drink to Omia,” he said, pulling another stool over and ordering a round of drinks.

Everyone else in the bar went back to what they were doing, leaving the trio to talk and laugh, their voices fading into the droning murmur of the tavern.

A few minutes later Merego showed up. “I’m back, QM,” he said, settling heavily into the chair across from Tal. He put his elbows down, the table creaking, then brought some slips of paper to his lips and kissed them. “I have a good feeling about these bets.”

Tal studied him. His slim form and slouching posture always surprised her, so unassuming compared to the rich tenor of his voice. But it was the dark tone of his skin and frizzy blue-black hair that set him apart. He was half Eru but also half Terlan. Terlans were a dark-skinned people from across the Utara Sea on the other continent, darker even than Eru. Before the Lightbound Rebellion they’d been rare in Starla. But after Starla unseated the ruling Terlan king in favor of a queen, unrest had sent thousands fleeing their homeland, many crossing the seas to seek fortune in Starla City.

“You always have a good feeling about a couple bets,” Tal said, smiling to soften the scold in her words. “You’ll be out two months’ pay by the end of Tiwoka.”

“Naaah,” Merego said. “I’m getting a feel for the birds down here. I went in too much for fine lines but I’m onto what separates

true talent from the also-rans.”

“I hope so,” Tal said, closing her notebook. “Did you speak to Ilo?”

“Yes. Gave her your instructions. Buy up as much hardtack and salted pork as possible. Head over to Edgerton and do the same. Are you sure it’s wise? We might not be here that long.”

Tal ran her tongue across her teeth. “I can have Ilo sit on the goods if I get reassigned.” With her finger she traced the notches and grooves in the table, marks from mugs set down roughly over the years. “Besides, if the Captain cuts rations for Eru soldiers—as I suspect she might—it’ll allow me to supplement the soldiers’ provisions. And if the winter is mild, hardtack and salted pork keep. I can always unload them in the spring.”

Merego put up his hands and laughed. “Alight, alright. You know your business. It’s too bad we aren’t closer to Starla City or a bigger trade town. You always do better with a larger market. There’s hardly enough business here to work your magic.”

Tal took another sip from her mug to hide her face. Compliments always left her feeling embarrassed. She’d discovered quickly in the army that she had a gift for knowing what to buy and when to sell to turn a tidy profit. The first quartermastra she’d been assistant to showed her how to work the system, take the money for supplies, work some side deals, grow a reserve to purchase a thing or three down the road, winter blankets or new shoes. At her second placement, the Starlan quartermastra practically let Tal run things while taking all the credit.

If she looked back even farther, Tal could see how Mother had been preparing her for this work her whole life, taking her along to the big markets in Brasor, telling her to keep her eyes open and listen to what the people talked about. “It’s the best way to get a sense of what people need, what might be in demand the next month or season.”

Once Tal rose to full quartermastra, she quickly put Mother's advice into practice, finding deals to build up a reserve. She discovered commanders often stinted when provisioning their Eru soldiers, so it fell on quartermastras like Tal to make up the difference. Over the years she'd found a way to do this and more, expanding her reserves until she was able to hire agents to work on her behalf outside the army, helping her build a nest egg and fuel the hope for a life beyond her commission where she could go into business on her own.

Then the Lightbound Rebellion happened.

Eru from all over Starla flocked to the southern border, joining the Lightbound, a group formed by Terlans and committed to combating Starla and its magic. According to the Lightbound, Starlan magic was corrupting the world, perverting the natural lifeforces of Deseria. The Lightbound called on all Eru to rebel, cast off their Starlan overlords and come to the new utopia of First Light. A few thousand Eru answered the call—but so did the Starlan army.

It was a slaughter, the army cutting down civilians, driving more into the Cursekin Badlands where the crazed gnoll beasts or brutal heat would kill them. Seeing the piled dead, her people, had changed Tal forever. It wasn't enough to escape the Starlan army anymore. She had to do more, work to free her people.

In the last two years, she'd used her agents to pursue one scheme after another, trying to build up assets, a base to start her own revolution. She tried to take over a silver mine in Idias, a flechette factory in Starla City and a lumberyard in Tarshi. Each venture ended in failure. The authorities rescinded her license for the lumberyard, the locals didn't want an outsider taking their business. She had to sell the flechette factory for a loss as Eru weren't allowed to own weapons makeries. And once she saw how the silver mine exploited its workers, mostly Eru, she shut it down.



These setbacks weighed on her like the load of netted sablefish that fell on her once in a northern port; each misfortune reminded her of the frowns and rebukes of Starlan commanders and teachers over the years, left her wondering if it was foolish to even try. But she refused to give up; she knew she could do it. She just needed to plan everything perfectly.

Months after the lumberyard fiasco, she was at a bar in the northwest, Denausee territory. Someone mentioned coppa, the Omaka Eru down in the southwest—

“Excuse me,” the older man from the bar said, drawing Tal’s attention back. He stood before her table, smiling. “You remind me so much of my sister, the high cheekbones, the sleek black of your hair, the warmth of your smile.”

Tal wasn’t sure how to respond, her cheeks warming. “Th— Thank you,” she said, her words falling somewhere between a statement and question. Why did she have to feel so awkward when someone complimented her! It was hard to trust the compliment as genuine after all the slights and judgments from Starlans. “I hope your sister is well.”

“Sadly, she is no longer with us. But when she lived, she was a credit to the people, always looking out for others.”

“I’m sorry to hear she’s moved on . . .” Tal said, trailing off when the man’s face went slack, his eyes glazed over. Was he remembering his sister? Maybe he was drunk? The fit passed and his eyes snapped back into focus, the smile returning. “Her spirit rests here.” He put his hand flat against his chest. “It aided me with those lovely women at the bar.” He gestured over his shoulder to Lalu and Edri who were talking quietly, their heads almost touching.

“I’m Nestor Kellig of the Soalee, by the way.”

Merego had been staring at one of his betting slips but looked up at this Nestor Kellig. “Your people are up in the northeast? You’ve

come a long way, uncle.” Merego gave Nestor a small half-grin.

“I’ve traveled farther than most and am new here, was hoping someone could give me the lay of the land.”

“Of course,” Merego said, kicking out a chair. “Have a seat. I’m Ontaku Merego. I grew up in Starla City but my mother’s people are Soalee.”

Merego turned his face away from Kellig so only Tal could see, opening his mouth in an excited smile. Tal took the hint. It was about time she left anyway. She needed the quiet of her tent and time to figure out how to get the leads Ohtaya had collected to the Kanari while staying clear of them. It had to be done just right. She couldn’t let them discover her spirit magic.

Tal cleared her throat, stretching her arms as if tired. “Well, I think I’ve seen enough for one night. Thanks for helping those women, Kellig. I’m Tal Ch’kola of the Atnali.” Tal rose, reaching out an arm in greeting.

A flicker ran across Kellig’s eyes, a momentary hesitation before he met her embrace. “May the Great Spirit guide you. Sleep well, Ch’kola.”

“THEY’RE HERE.” Jereo’s head stuck through the flaps of Tal’s tent, his shadow stretching almost to her worktable. She swallowed and stood up, lifting a satchel over her shoulder.

Outside, soldiers were gathered in small flocks facing west, where five riders rode at a slow pace toward the guard post.

“Shadow’s own. It’s them,” Tal heard someone whisper. A short woman leaned around a man to get a better look at these Kanari. The man said to her, “Don’t look them in the eye. I hear they can curse with a glance.”

“I hear they drink blood and worship Du’kel, every last one,” the short woman said.

The dweoma with the turquoise beads in her hair whistled disapprovingly. “Why do we need them? The Captain can run the investigation just fine.”

“Better whatever killed those matrons goes after them than the Captain—or us,” Melkin said, tucking his shirt into his belt. He’d been dozing in his tent after morning patrol, his brown hair disheveled from lying down.

The riders reached the west entrance, dismounting to speak with the guards. Something red-gold shone beneath the outer garments of the two riders in front. *Vestments of the Kanari*. Rumor said the gambesons Kanari wore could turn any blade and even absorb magic.

Seeing those garments made it real. Tal liked to think she was above baseless superstition but the stories flooded her mind. Men who used magic. Only Kanari, among all the men in Starla, were

allowed to practice magic, at least since the Breakers turned traitor two-hundred years ago. Legend told that the Breakers, the once-renowned male maegas who'd served as vanguard to Starla's armies, were unstoppable on the battlefield. But pride fueled a lust for power, leading them to rebel and attack the heart of Starla City, destroying the once-beautiful Tower of Gerla. Many songs praised the stunning glory of that once-wondrous tower, floating above the city, a beacon of Starla's progress and greatness. Through the cruelty and wickedness of the Breakers, Gerla was brought down, killing ten-thousand innocents.

As the rubble settled, shock and outrage flared and the Synod, the ruling body of Starla, expelled the Breakers from the military, revoked their charters in the great Illu houses and commanded every last Breaker be hunted down. Within a generation, no man who wielded magic walked free in Starla.

Almost four decades went by. Men suspected of using magic were sent to the Presidio, the prison tower built on a jagged spike of rock out in Starlan Bay. They would probably still be there if not for Salsan saboteurs using magic to infiltrate and set fire to Starla's main naval shipyard. The attack damaged two warships and disrupted repair efforts on several other vessels.

While at first this appeared to be a small setback for the navy, the loss of the facilities ended up being worse than anyone could have imagined. Without the ability to properly maintain the fleet, naval patrols thinned and piracy thrived, wreaking havoc on Starla's dominance in the Ulara Sea.

As commerce fell, pressure on the Synod increased. In response they directed the creation of the Kanari Guard, an order of men trained in defensive magics and tasked with investigation and prevention of illicit magical use. Tal wondered if the rulers of Starla appreciated the irony of sending those once prohibited from using magic to find and stop the use of illegal and unlawful magic. It was

like sending a disgraced politician to root out corruption in the Assembly.

“They don’t look like much. One’s an Eru,” a rough voice broke in. Tal couldn’t help but smile. If the world said to go one way, Biyan was sure to rush the other.

Tal took one last look at the Kanari. She’d hoped to avoid them as best she could, but the Captain had ordered her to be present when they arrived. Maybe they wouldn’t sense her spirit magic. Tal wished she could come up with a good excuse not to be there—but nothing came to mind.

With a deep breath she started weaving through those watching, making her way toward the Captain’s tent. It stood atop a small hillock with sweeping views of the surrounding lands. Tal’s steps slowed as she approached the tent and greeted the guard, who pushed aside the flap so she could step inside.

The first thing she noticed on entering was a faint musty odor. Fog came through almost daily so most tents had this smell. Tal burned scented candles a couple times a week to dispel it, taking down sections of her tent from time to time so they could dry more fully. The Captain clearly didn’t do this.

Standing at a plainly finished oak table, the Captain was leaning over a map of the region. Two weighted oil lamps rested on the table with several camp chairs set around it. A frame cot much like Tal’s sat in a corner, along with a couple of chests and other gear, all placed in an orderly fashion. There was a sparseness to the tent, no wall hangings or sentimental objects; the space was devoid of the bright colors many Starlans loved, but also lacked any artful touches, anything speaking to the Captain’s personality.

“Quartermastra,” the Captain said, not looking up, gesturing to a camp chair in the corner. “Take a seat. The Kanari have arrived?”

“Yes, Captain,” Tal said, saluting.

The Captain turned to Corporal Batl without another word. The two had been talking when Tal entered. They continued their conversation, now in whispers.

Tal almost fell to the floor when she sat down, the chair's touch so cold she thought she might pass out. It was like thrusting her hand into a stream fed by ice thaw, her body burning wherever it touched the chair. She clenched her jaw tight and bent away from the chairback, biting her tongue to keep from crying out.

Corporal Batl glanced over, a small smile breaking the line of his perpetual scowl. What did that mean? He never had anything but hostility for her. More to the point, why was Tal even here? The Captain rarely sought her counsel. That much was made clear in her first days. Many Starlan commanders brought their quartermastras into planning sessions as logistics and provisioning were vital to a company's operations. Perhaps the Captain did so with Starlan quartermastras but not with Tal, nor any other Eru quartermastras from what Tal had heard.

After several moments of agony, the freezing sensation lessened. She was almost able to think again when a crunch of boots came from outside. The guard pulled the tent flap open, revealing several soldiers taking up positions around the door. Then two men came into view, their red-gold coats glinting as if magnifying the faint sunlight.

The first man was unremarkable in height, deep brown skin and silver-black hair tied up in a braid running down his back. He smiled widely, showing off a flash of white teeth. Tal gave a start, her body suddenly cold in a way that had nothing to do with the chair. It was the older man from the *Field's Harvest*. Was their meeting the night before more than coincidence, her hopes to avoid the Kanari all for nothing?

"Good afternoon," he said, ducking his head as he came in. "This must be the farthest point from blessed Starla City. The

journey is certainly a wearying one.” He shook his head as if telling a joke, then bowed formally. “Captain Olania, I hope you don’t have to report back to the capital often. It’s a difficult trip, even with the dwimrail taking you to Brasor. Illu be praised the weather treated us kindly. I hear they get thunderstorms any time of year coming across the Falanin Mountains.”

His glance shifted from the Captain to Corporal Batl and then Tal, pausing a moment. The odd unfocused look came into his eyes again, as in the tavern, then passed, his attention returning to the Captain. “Allow me to introduce myself. Nestor Kellig, a First among the Wise of the Kanari Guard. I trust we are expected?”

Where the night before his speech cadence held the syncopated, rhythmic accents of the Eru nations from the northeast, now he sounded like he was from Starla City. Tal was impressed with how seamlessly he could shift his accent. But another thought intruded. Did he request she be here? Fear and suspicion coiled tightly in her; it was all she could do to keep from trembling.

The Captain tilted her head in the faintest of nods, a matron acknowledging a man in good standing. She used what Tal called her “official voice,” employed when she needed to radiate poise and eminence, such as for official reviews and visits by dignitaries. “Well met, Kanari Kellig. I am Captain Kyla Olania of the Omaka Protection Force, Starlan Army. One of my assistants, Corporal Esalee Batl—and Tal Ch’kola, our quartermastra.”

Kellig greeted Corporal Batl and Tal with quick salutes, then stepped back for the other Kanari. This man was clearly Starlan, tall with bright golden hair. His shoulders were not as heavy set as Kellig’s but still suggested a frame heavy with muscle. Tal could see calluses on his hands, a faint scar across his left cheek. He bowed as Kellig had done.

“Goran Key, a Second among the Wise. Kanari Guard.” He kept his eyes down but there was a lazy ease to his tone. He surveyed the

room, showing little interest before glancing at Tal. There was no glazed look from him, yet the pointed stare, the way he rolled his jaw, sent a shock through her. *He looks so much like Renlu.* Tal steeled her face, not wanting her emotions to be seen, but beneath she was like a melon, someone scraping out her innards with a sharp blade.

“Key,” the Captain said, tapping her fingers on the handle of the wand at her waist. “Is your family part of House Keylani?”

“My mother stands in the great circle.”

A grimace twisted the Captain’s face. Much of Starla’s wealth came from the twelve great Illu houses specializing in particular magics, each a driving force of their industry: Houses Merta and Gesuleen for building, Corasee for agriculture, Hussana for transportation. Keylani focused on defense, specializing in weaponry and other items used by Starla’s armies as well as private ventures.

At the center of each house stood a great circle, thirteen maegas whose power helped drive the makeries where the house produced goods both magical and mundane. No nation beyond Starla could compete with the works of the great Illu houses. This Kanari’s mother was one of the most powerful matrons in all of Starla. It couldn’t be coincidence someone so close to House Keylani was here to investigate the murders. Coppa was used in all manner of products bearing the leviathan emblem of House Keylani.

Kellig stepped into the silence, again smiling. “I’m sorry you face this tragic situation. Know that Starla is behind us and all necessary resources are at our disposal. We are committed to bringing those responsible to justice.” He produced a notebook from a belt pocket. “Now to business. We’ll set up our own camp not far from here. It’s best we keep our distance . . . ”

Tal found it hard to focus on what Kellig was saying. The other Kanari, the Starlan, had turned his head toward her. She was again reminded of Renlu. The chair and Kellig’s presence had sent shivers running through her, but how the Starlan watched her twisted up her



stomach, the muscles in her belly tightening as if she were going to vomit. She wished he'd look away, wished she was far away, not trapped in this horrid tent.

“ . . . I think that is it. For now. Kanari Key, do you wish to add anything?”

The second Kanari cleared his throat. “Only that it's an honor to serve Starla and her noble work. We understand the delicacy and speed required here. Know we will do our best.”

“Thank you, Kanari Key,” Kellig said. “Is there anything we should know, beyond what's been officially communicated, that might help our work?”

The Captain crushed her lips together, shooting a glance over at Corporal Batl. “You do have experience dealing with spirit magic?”

The two Kanari shared a look. The Starlan Kanari stepped forward, again not meeting the Captain's eyes. “It's rare but we've encountered it before. The old ways are harder to stamp out than history books would lead you to believe. Why do you ask?”

The Captain's eyes lingered on Corporal Batl before she replied. “Given the nature of the murders, knowledge of spirit magic seems paramount. More so than connections to great Illu houses.”

“We appreciate your need for Kanari with . . . a certain expertise,” Kellig said. “Rest assured we are fully capable of deciphering the truth.” Kellig gave the Captain a half bow.

The Captain didn't respond right away, the muscles in her jaw straining. “I'm glad we're in such capable hands.”

Kellig put a hand on the Starlan Kanari's shoulder, leading him in another half bow. “Many thanks, Captain. With your leave we will see to our preparations.”

The Captain waved her hand in dismissal, sending Tal out shortly afterward before resuming her whispered conversation with

Corporal Batl.

“Oh, quartermastra,” the Captain said as Tal reached the tent flap. “Be sure to report any supplies or equipment the Kanari request. I don’t trust them. Men who use magic, after all.”

“Yes, Captain,” Tal said, pushing aside the flap and leaving. The cold feeling from the chair was giving way to a nagging disquiet. Atop it all she still wasn’t sure why the Captain had commanded her to be here in the first place.

\* \* \*

“QM, you’re a sunny end to an overcast week,” someone called out. Tal froze, fear and suspicion swirling around her, pinning her in place as the Starlan Kanari appeared from between two tents halfway down the Captain’s hill. He had a smile on his face she liked less than latrine duty. *He looks so much like Renlu.*

“Hold that expression, QM. I want anyone watching to see your displeasure,” he said softly, stepping uncomfortably close, leering down at her with a self-satisfied smile. “Kellig sent me to speak with you.”

Tal cut her eyes at the Starlan. Was this some pretense, a bid to get her alone? “Why doesn’t Kellig speak with me himself?”

“The Eru Kanari talking to the Eru quartermastra would be suspicious. A Starlan highman fresh off the road looking for company . . . well, that’s a story told often, no?”

A scowl pulled at the corners of Tal’s mouth. She had heard about men from the powerful families that ran the great Illu houses trying to entice women into their beds. Renlu’s smile and honeyed words came back. “Come, Tal, you must have fun *sometimes*? I hear there’s a lovely glade nearby that would be perfect for a picnic.”

The Starlan rubbed his chin, the stubble making a scratching sound. “Kellig says it regards something he saw last night, something

we both saw in Captain Olania's tent."

That didn't sound good. She stared down the path, fighting the urge to flee. *I was trying to avoid these Kanari. Now they want me to meet them in secret?*

The Kanari's smile slipped. "It isn't a request. We can have you dragged to the sheriff house in Harmony. Save ourselves the headache of discretion."

"Then I guess I have no choice, do I?"

"Thank you for honoring us," the Starlan said, smiling again, "and let me offer a gift in return." He walked around Tal, as if measuring her up and down. "When we separate, look past your tent to the fire-ring. The Eru woman. She was sitting there twenty minutes before you came to the Captain's tent. She's still there now. When she isn't polishing that wand out of existence, I do believe she has eyes only for you."

"How do you know?"

"Do you think we're like Alorna Hila, just strolling into town to save the day?" He came close again, his ripe travel-worn smell wrinkling her nose. He continued in a low voice. "We watched the camp for a few minutes before making our big entrance. You can never be too sure of things as Kanari. We serve Starla but Starla is often against us. Know the feeling?"

Tal flinched. She wanted to mark the woman by the campfire but the Starlan raised his hand in warning. How did he know about Alorna Hila? She was the heroine of a series of novels about an Eru adventurer, traveling the land, righting wrongs, standing up to the corrupt and showing how an Eru could contribute to the greatness of Starla. Tal didn't think any Starlans read those stories. They were pretty terrible. Tal had only read two because her little brother loved them.

“Fourth hour after sundown,” the Starlan said. “There’s a rock outcropping standing in a field north of the road, almost half a mile toward Harmony. You can meet us there.”

Without another word, he huffed, letting out an exasperated grunt and stomping off with an angry set to his shoulders.

After he was gone, Tal made her way to her tent, rubbing her chin as if lost in thought. The Eru woman was there, oiling her wand—and occasionally glancing up at Tal.

“Shadow’s own,” Tal said. Why would the Captain have someone watching her? She suspected if she wanted an answer, she’d have to meet with these Kanari.

## 8

THE LOUD CLICKING of her pocket watch tipped Tal out of her thoughts. It was a beautiful instrument, encased in brass, engraved with two ravens in flight on the outer cover. She'd set its alarm for three and a half hours past sundown, a reminder for her meeting with the Kanari.

Only now she didn't want to leave her tent. The warmth of her oil stove radiated pleasantly against her left side. She was comfortable and the ledgers and personal correspondence needed her attention.

With a sigh she collected her work and put it in her lockbox; she'd been trying to decide what to buy at the next market day for her personal accounts. On the table was the letter from Sedai Hokatika, the one she'd mentioned to Ohtaya. In it Hokatika said the coppa he planted didn't have the magical properties. Maybe an Omaka was needed? Perhaps Ohtaya could plant the coppa nearby?

There had to be a way to get it to take root and possess the magic. Hokatika had already tried planting at two other sites. Neither worked. Her plan depended on growing the coppa somewhere free of Starlan control where Eru handled the wealth, enjoying the full measure of the profits rather than the meager leavings the Starlans let the Omaka keep.

Her eyes went back to the pocket watch. She didn't know what would come of this meeting with the Kanari. Her plans were focused on staying away from them, getting them to look in the right direction.

For a while she'd toyed with the idea of not going—but that might make things worse. If she met them tonight and it was a ruse

to take her, she had a better chance of escaping in dark woodlands than in camp with a whole company of soldiers at their backs. Not for the first time she wished she had actual spirit magic that could help. Talking to animals could get her out of camp but wasn't going to stop the Kanari—and given their abilities, anything she could do with Illu magic wouldn't be much use.

Maybe something more conventional might work? She picked up a satchel she kept under her table and searched for Father's skinning knife, the one with the deer-hide scabbard, painted with the image of a mounted hunter chasing a bison while a raven followed. It wasn't where it should be, where she always kept it. *Have the last few days addled my mind to where I no longer put things in their proper places?*

Not having the time to scour her tent, Tal pushed the concern away, extinguishing the stove and lamps before putting on her greatcoat. She crouched down at the tent flap and closed her eyes, letting them adjust to the dark. After a moment she opened the flap slightly and looked out. Pela was lying in the third pup tent across from her.

*Is the watcher there?* Tal signed with traditional hand talk.

*Yes, sneak out the back,* Pela gestured.

Tal went to the back of her tent, where she'd loosened two of the stakes. Lifting up the fabric she made her way into the night, pausing to listen to the soft sounds of the camp, the steady breathing of soldiers in their tents, a distant cough, the murmur of guards at their post.

Tal struggled with the urge to turn her back on the Kanari and slip back into her tent. She shook her head, setting the thought aside before moving off a few rows. It was dark so she had to go slow, though the gray clouds blocking out the stars gave off enough light to see by. When she reached the horse picket on the north side of camp, she used her magic to soothe the horses, then she was outside camp,

wending through the brush. She went in a wide arc, slowly shifting west toward Edgerton Road and Harmony, following the road for almost a quarter mile before finally joining it.

The surface of the road was hardpacked dirt with ruts from cart and wagon traffic. Tal kept to the edge, not wanting to step on horse droppings or stumble in one of the divots made during the last rainy season when oxen and horses tore up the muddy road with their heavy hooves.

The night was quiet. No insects sang. The wind was so faint it didn't even whisper through the grass or creak the oaks lining the road. This walk would almost be relaxing if she wasn't constantly worried about a gray wolf appearing from the shadows. She had her wand out, ready, just in case. Ohtaya might be calm around the animal but she couldn't help feeling the menace in the way it glowered at her.

A rustling came from behind her. She whipped her head back, expecting the gray wolf—but saw nothing. The sound came again, leaving her rigid with fear. It wasn't until the third time that she realized it was the flapping of her half cape, part of the standard-issue greatcoat. This wouldn't happen back home. Her Atnali coat, made of deerskin, had no ornamental flaps to its outer layer. It was oiled to keep off the rain, fit more snugly and protected better against the wind.

Up ahead a shoulder of rock rose, nestled among a stand of trees set in the flat between two foothills. This must be the place. Tal stopped, looking around. A shape dislodged from the deeper darkness beneath the outcropping. Tal squeezed the handle of her wand, ready for the wolf. The shape held up a hand as the murky light caught its features.

"QM," the Starlan Kanari said in a whisper, his eyes sweeping the road in both directions. "I hope it wasn't too hard to get out of camp."

Tal took a quick breath in. “I’m taking a risk coming here.”

“What must happen tonight is important. Come.” The Starlan led her along the edge of a field, staying within the shadow of the trees. They came on a trail and followed it into the woods, moving toward the hills.

*What am I doing? This feels like a trap.* Tal gave a wary look back before the trees closed in, the thought of running bouncing on the surface of her mind like an empty barrel in a rough river current.

The Starlan led her deeper into a forest of live oaks and buckeyes. After ten minutes they came to a small clearing, perhaps twenty paces across. Standing amid some dew-wet tussocks of grass was Kellig. He held a dwimstone torch in the palm of his right hand. The torch was shaped like a pinecone, the seed scales still pressed together in a knobby mass sitting on a thin stone base.

In the shadows cast by the faint light, Tal could see Kellig’s face. There was no flashing smile, no warmth to his greeting. A tremor shook Tal’s hands. *This doesn’t feel right.*

“Quartermastra Ch’kola,” Kellig said. “There are some things we need to attend to. Put away your wand. It won’t serve you here.”

Tal opened her mouth to protest then holstered the wand, wishing she had Father’s knife. “What’s this about?”

“Are you aware that Captain Olania has tried to have you transferred?”

Tal raised an eyebrow, pretending to be surprised. This was known to her. She had called in a favor at regional to delay the transfer. It wasn’t exactly unexpected. During the ten years the Captain had held the Harmony posting, most Eru quartermastras lasted no more than a month or two. Tal was pushing into her fourth month and wasn’t likely to last more than two more. She’d be gone already if the secretary to the regional commander didn’t value skin



cream from Maliss Naur more than pleasing a cantankerous career captain on the borderlands.

“Hmm. You did know,” Kellig said, stroking his chin. “Your contact at regional is well placed. Unfortunately, it seems your captain has a new way of getting rid of you.”

“What Kellig is trying to say is Captain Olania means to make you the scapegoat for the murders,” the Starlan said, barely waiting for Kellig to finish speaking.

“Wh-what?” Tal took a step back. Her first instinct was to dismiss what he said. She bit down on her tongue, forcing her eyebrows into a frown to keep the deep shock from showing. She hated being vulnerable around those she didn’t know, a hard lesson from Eru School. The naturalist teacher’s words rang in her head as she remembered how the other children had looked at her. *If the Ravens exist, would they not punish me for this?*

“Key,” Kellig said, glaring at the Starlan. “Be patient. This isn’t easy.”

“It never is,” the Starlan said, gazing into the forest shadows.

Kellig sighed, settling himself on a fallen tree covered in moss. “Ch’kola, when I saw you last night, I noticed something. It’s why I came to your table. I could feel magic, spirit magic. Not strong, likely the result of small magics bestowed by your numen god.”

He peered into the lamp’s light for a moment, his thoughts hidden behind a blank face. “According to army records, you’re incredibly good at bookkeeping and tabulations. The error rate in your accounts is among the lowest in the whole army. Merego also speaks highly of your gifts as a merchant. He says you’re great at turning deals, buying what’s needed, what others don’t value, then selling to those who need it most. You’re Atnali, yes?”

Tal furrowed her brows. What did being good at her job have to do with being Atnali?

Kellig made a noise in his throat. “The Ravens are tricksters. They must understand their marks to fool them. Our numen gods often choose individuals already talented in what they value when bestowing gifts. Which might explain your affinity for trade. Are there any other small magics you’re able to do?”

“I don’t have spirit magic,” Tal said, wishing she could slow the beating of her heart. “You’re mistaken.”

The Starlan quirked his mouth to the side, the meaning clear. *That’s what they all say.* She could feel her hands starting to shake.

Kellig spoke, “As you know, we’re bound to report spirit-magic use. The Synod banned it almost nine-hundred years ago.”

“I didn’t kill those matrons. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Please, QM,” the Starlan said. “We sensed spirit magic on you. There’s no point denying it.”

Tal’s hands were quaking so hard she doubted she could even pull her wand out, let alone do anything with it. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She’d spent her entire life trying to avoid Kanari, bowing to the Starlans in the hopes they wouldn’t suspect her of anything—least of all spirit magic. And yet here she was, caught. What could she do, alone, against two Kanari?

“Well,” the Starlan said. “If you haven’t killed, what do you use your spirit magic for?”

Tal tried to swallow, her throat painfully dry. They were convinced she had spirit magic. Maybe if she admitted to some small magic, they might not view her as a threat and let their guards down. “I—I can speak to animals. Birds mostly.”

The Starlan’s jaw fell open while Kellig’s face remained almost unchanged. Yet they were both so still she thought maybe they were stunned. Could she use this to her advantage, make a run for it?

“Don’t bother,” the Starlan said, taking a step toward her. “You wouldn’t get to the tree line.”

Tal’s shoulders drooped. They had her in their power.

The Starlan came up and pulled the wand from her belt. “I’m sorry, quartermaster. We can’t let you escape.” He pointed to Kellig and himself, tapping the handle of her wand against his palm. “If we don’t report you, we forfeit our lives.”

Tal narrowed her eyes. Why was he telling her this, to justify what they did, taking people who’d done nothing wrong? Or was this a negotiation?

“What do you want from me? Money?” She tried to guess the price to buy the silence of two Kanari. How long would it take to get the funds together? Emotions rumbled within her like the boulders of a rockslide, each falling on the next, adding to her worry. Could she escape by buying them off? How dare they put a price on her freedom. If she still had her wand, she’d use it on them, even if it led to her doom.

“Easy, younger sister,” Kellig said, holding up a hand. “We aren’t going to report you. We just need you to be honest with us.” He set the dwimstone torch down—its light fading. “The situation is difficult. If others come and discover your spirit magic, our lives are in danger as well as your own.”

“Why aren’t you reporting me? If you don’t want money, then why?”

“We aren’t sure what’s going on,” the Starlan said. “We think you were marked somehow.”

“Someone is using spirit magic . . . on me?” Tal said. “Maybe it’s who killed the matrons.”

“Perhaps,” Kellig said. “When we came into the tent, the spirit magic on you was different. Like a trumpet call compared to the

night before.” He looked over at the Starlan. “We think someone enchanted you or something you touched so when we came in, we’d see spirit magic. Do you remember touching anything?”

Tal thought back to the Captain’s tent. “The Captain had me sit in a chair. It was freezing cold.” An odd memory came to mind. She’d gone to meet Ohtaya in town at a leatherworker’s shop. The old man had shown her a piece of carved wood, beautifully worked with images of coppa and squirrels, birds and butterflies. Ohtaya called it a sunwood and said his people used it to track the path of the sunrise throughout the year. “See these notches running along the top?” Ohtaya had said. “They tell us when to plant our important crops. Corn for this one, then cotton here, finally beans and then squash.” Ohtaya had handed the sunwood to her, its touch causing the same shocking cold as the chair.

This memory came and went like a deer slipping among the trees after dusk. Even as she tried to recall it, the two men shared another glance, some meaning passing between them. The Starlan spoke, “We cannot ignore the fact that you have spirit magic. If anyone finds out, we’ll follow you to the grave.”

“Then what?” Tal said, not knowing what to feel. Were they going to arrest her for spirit magic or not? The uncertainty left her feeling deflated, like a waterskin after its contents had been pressed out. This was the same feeling she had when trying to meet the impossible demands of Starlan teachers and commanders.

The Kanari looked at each other for a good while, long enough for Tal to imagine a dismal end, hands bound before her. She could see the sad, embarrassed expressions they’d wear as they did their duty, taking her away. She would be just another—

“I know a way to hide your abilities,” Kellig said. “We call it a spirit screen. But it won’t be easy. You must learn—and quickly.”

Across the space of his words, she’d gone from death to life, from falling into a muddy stream tangled up in heavy canvas, unable

to breath, to tearing free of the slick, clinging material. Tal struggled to contain herself, unsure if she could trust the hope rising within her. She could mask her abilities? This new possibility was like a thing alive, rustling in the undergrowth of her heart, warring with the heavy grasping fear from moments before. “What must I do?”

Kellig smiled. “There are more spirit maegas than you would expect. I’ve not met a full ronganta trained in the old ways, but some of us have knowledge of the old ways.” He retrieved the dwimstone torch, which burst out again in an orange glow. “Even as the Starlans hunted us, there were those who hid their power—and shared it with others. But before you can use spirit magic, even this spirit screen, you must be able to see spirit magic. You’ve been trained in Illu magic?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re familiar with divination, the art of seeing and sensing magic? Good. Let’s begin there.”

## 9

“HOLD IT in the palm of your hand.”

Kellig had shown her how to activate what he called a sight stone, what she'd mistaken for a dwimstone torch.

Now Tal sat at the worktable in her tent, unable to sleep, fascinated by it. Actual spirit magic. Not just stories. She could feel a smile stretching her face, the thrill of what she could do like spring waters coming to sunbaked lands. It'd taken over an hour practicing with the Kanari before she managed to see even the vaguest outline of a spirit flame.

“Practice a dozen times a day,” Kellig had said. “You must hone this second sight until you can see the minute flickers, the many tongues of the spirit flame. By using the sight stone, you'll grow in your ability to see the spirit world.”

Tal held the sight stone in her hands, testing the odd heaviness of it, admiring the citrine-orange gleam of the pinecone-shaped stone. She closed her eyes as Kellig had instructed, pushing out as if she had a phantom body, a ghost self in the darkness.

“Reach beyond. Then open your eyes.”

The first time she did it, she'd seen a faint something bending atop the sight stone's lighted surface. Then it was gone. Each time he asked her what she saw. “I don't know.” “I can't tell.” “I'm not sure.” She tried again and again, the flicker remaining a moment longer each time. Finally, she saw it. With a grin so wide it hurt, she said, “A flame. It's a gray-white flame.”

“Good,” Kellig said, giving her a light pat on the arm. “Your spirit sight is growing. Much better than his.” Kellig gave the Starlan

a mock sneer.

The Starlan harrumphed, turning away with his arms across his chest. “Yeah, yeah. It’s not like I have numen gods giving me gifts, holding open the doors to the spirit world.”

“Don’t worry about him, Ch’kola. He’s just jealous. Can’t handle not being the best.” The Starlan stalked off into the dark, Kellig’s smile following him.

After a few more attempts, Kellig was satisfied and sent Tal back to camp. She was so addled by everything, weak from the thistles of fear and warm glow of excitement, feeling like she’d returned from the dead, that she almost walked into camp through the guard post. The soft chatter of the guards brought her back to her senses in time to slip off the road. She snuck through the horse pickets and the back of her tent.

Alone at her worktable, she’d been unable to sleep, her mind afire with the possibilities, her fear and excitement like shadows and light dancing on the tent walls. She was really doing it, using spirit magic. She tried again, closing her eyes and reaching out. This time the pale shadowy flame remained a good five seconds. It was hard to keep from laughing.

She looked around her tent, eyes settling on the sturdy, well-worn wood of her worktable and the trappings of her trade: two weighted lanterns, non-drip dwimpens, ordered piles of papers containing accounts of stores, requisitions for materials and goods, correspondence with suppliers. She pulled out Grandmother’s sepia-colored cloth mat from its place in one of her chests. The cloth had a faded pattern of trees, mountains and two ravens; it had been passed down from the old times before the Starlans came. The sight of it filled Tal with pride, reminding her of its long history, all her ancestors who had plied their crafts upon it, preparing meat for curing, drying sinews into thread, mending garments, mixing medicines and working charms. It was a comforting presence in a life

spent so far away from her people. She loved the smell of it, rich earth and strong spices. She had got it out hoping it would help with the spirit magic. What a silly thought. An object couldn't help her work spirit magic, could it?

Her gaze shifted to her favorite wall hangings. A majestic waterfall scene, part of the sacred Ulutat River of the Kaling people in northeastern Starla. The water ran in white cascades across dark stones, mosses growing out on both sides. The next hanging was of a wikita tree seen from its base, the vast bole of the tree rising up into a clear sky, dwarfing smaller white firs in the background. Dappled sunlight caught on the red bark. These mighty trees grew in the mountain forests above her home. Many of her people would trek up to touch one before going on a long journey, to bring luck. Whenever her work grew difficult, admiring this picture, remembering the soft, spongy touch of the wikita's reddish bark brought her peace.

Next, she turned to her greatest pride, a lantern hanging from the wood-frame ceiling of her tent. It was dark now but when lit gave off an impressive amount of light, tiny silver-rimmed glass leaves reflecting and focusing the yellow-orange flame at its heart. This had been a gift during her third year in the army when she'd been in the northwest, among the Ishkane people. She'd pulled strings at regional to get a brutal Starlan sergeant reassigned away from an Ishkane settlement—all for the price of a flagon of Mercosi rum and a silk shawl from Arotak. The headwoman gave Tal the lantern in thanks. Its beauty beguiled her, the intricate veining of the glass to look like leaves, how lightweight yet durable it was while illuminating her tent.

The smile fell from Tal's face as she lowered her head. The letter from Sedai Hokatika was on the floor, dirt pressed into it in the shape of a boot. Someone had been in her tent. Beside the letter was her lockbox. The charcoal gray box was unmoved but she could see deep imprints in the dried grass where someone had knelt, likely trying to lift it. They must not have seen the scrollwork in the dark. It



was a Golnari lockbox. The Golnari orcs were the finest bladesmiths in all of Deseria. They also made many useful, cunning things, including the best lockboxes. This one was enchanted to resist being moved. When the magic was active, it weighed twenty times normal, doubling several times over the more someone tried to move it.

Tal examined the lock. There was a scuff where someone had tried to break it. She worked the lock, sliding her fingers across a series of Golnari hieroglyphs.

The combination was a story. The one for this box told of Eko, the Golnari trickster god, who had gathered all the knowledge in the world into a basket, but kept tripping, the knowledge tumbling out as he traveled. In this way the people were able to find that knowledge and use it to prosper. When Tal bought the lockbox, she chose this story; it reminded her of the Raven story about Squirrel and the Acorns. Tal's fingers went to the hieroglyphs for Eko, basket, travel, loss and sharing.

The box clicked, the lid popping ajar. Tal checked the contents. This was where she kept sensitive documents, a small amount of money, statements of funds from personal ventures, letters of credit and other important papers. She set the sight stone inside and locked it again.

Her eyes went back to the letter. Everything they said there was in code. No one would puzzle out what they were talking about, Hokatika going on about how *the weather is good*, code for the coppa taking root, but *it was a bit windy*, meaning the magical properties didn't take. Tal sat back in her camp chair, rubbing her eyes with the bases of her palms. Someone had come into her tent. Someone had tried to break into her lockbox. The violation. The one place she felt safe. She tried to think but her thoughts just seemed to unravel like a loose coil of ribbon bounding off a table.

Tal slumped in her chair, resting her elbows on her knees. Her foot hit against one of the satchels she kept under the table. The

satchel shouldn't be there; that wasn't where she'd left it before going to meet the Kanari. She picked it up, finding some of the contents had spilled out, hide-sleeve folders filled with purchase orders, weekly inventory manifests and equipment requests. She lifted the satchel into her lap. Was anything missing?

The knife. This is where Father's skinning knife was supposed to be. It was where she always put it. A sick thought came to her: If they'd snuck in once, maybe they'd come before.

Tears formed in Tal's eyes. Father's knife. It was the only thing she had from him. He'd left when she was thirteen and after all these years, she couldn't even remember his face. All she could recall was his quiet demeanor, the way he made Mother smile, like when he crafted her a tooled leather purse with a garland of wildflowers around the edge and three calla lilies—Mother's favorite—at the center. Or when the driver who normally picked up goods for the autumn Tiwokan got sick and Father took the cart to Brasor to get the two dozen Nerrea blankets Mother ordered.

The blankets had been a tremendous success, selling out before noon. Four blankets were worth the price of a good riding horse, made from the finest wool in all of Starla, weaved together from bright colors into beautiful geometric designs. The blankets were prized for their ability to keep water off, even in heavy rains, as well as for their rarity. The Nerrea lived on the remote southeastern end of the Southern Reaches in a land so dry and desolate it made these Omaka lands look like a rainforest.

*They took Father's knife.* Tal tossed the satchel to the ground and stumbled to her cot, burying her face in the sleeve of her shirt, crying the tears she'd held back, not wanting to let them flow in front of the Kanari, not wanting the Kanari to see how scared she was.

The Kanari's words drifted back to her. Someone had enchanted the chair in the Captain's tent so the Kanari would see spirit magic. She'd been so careful in her planning, working in secret,

being discreet in who she bribed to get her people in place, approaching the Omaka without rousing suspicions, sending Hokatika off to test the coppa.

And none of it mattered.

She'd wanted to believe the Captain wouldn't do this, wouldn't accuse her of spirit magic just to get rid of her, to make the threat of the murders go away. It was so foreign to Tal to use someone so callously, mark them for death just to get her way. *What did it matter to the Captain? Just another dead errie.*

Tal lay there a long time with dread squeezing at her heart as she sobbed into her pillow. The Starlans would get her for murder. If she ran, they'd hunt her to the edges of Starla and beyond. It didn't matter that she didn't do it. It didn't matter if a false accusation cost her life and devastated her family. It didn't matter that the lies would be used to justify how Starlans treated her people. There was nothing she could do. It was all hopeless.

So Tal lay in her cot weeping. After a while she calmed enough to gather her wits. Wiping the tears from her face, she got up and paced around her table, forcing the details of her situation into neat lines of a ledger in her mind: the dweoma watching her, the Captain having her come to meet the Kanari, the attempt to break into her lockbox, Father's knife stolen. The pattern was clear. The Captain meant to set her up for the murders. What could she do to stop it?

She clasped her hands together. She had to think. Exhaustion was like hard metal pressing behind her eyes. She could run, take what she had, leave Starla altogether. She could . . .

Her mind abruptly skipped away, her worries twisting into the faces of the murdered matrons and their cries. She was in a room within some small homestead, the shadowed shape of trees looming against a window. The matrons lay on a table. Blood was running across their bodies in lines and shapes, the same as those on the canvas they'd been wrapped in. She tried to turn, run away. But she

couldn't move. All she could do was stand there watching, wishing she was anywhere else . . .

Then she was moving toward one of the matrons, a knife's edge gleaming before her . . .

Only for the world to be lost in a flurry of black feathers. She was rising into the sky.

*It's alright, daughter. We're here.*

The sky was clear and colorless, the sun a white glow in the east. She was being carried by ravens. No, not ravens. The Raven gods.

*We've come for you. We heard your call.*

They wheeled in a circle, turning away from the rising sun, which was widening as it rose in the east. Below, Tal could hear the howl of wolves and the rustle and creak of trees shaking in the wind. In the last moments before she knew no more, a flutter of thoughts came, a whispered resolve against what she saw, what the Captain meant to do to her, a final flaring before she slipped into darkness.

*They can't win. They can't do this to us again.*

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## Appendix I: Glossary

(Bolded terms indicate other entries in the glossary)

**All-Mother Illu**- The goddess of light, life and creation among the **Starlans**, viewed as a mighty mother-warrior and champion of morality.

**Ankasi**- A wood and bone flute popular with the **Eru** peoples of the **Southern Reaches**.

**Ansey**- The most prestigious form of dance in **Starla**, composed of formalized movements and gestures, particularly popular among **Starlan** elites.

**Arotak / Arotakans**- The realm and its people in southern **Elen**, composed mostly of gnomes (a small insect-like people).

**Assembly, The**- Also known as the Starlan Federation Assembly, this is the ruling legislative body of the **Starlan Federation** with representatives from 20 districts across **Starla**.

**Atnali**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** who once roamed the grasslands in the west of the **Southern Reaches**.

**Bobs (Currency)**- The lowest denomination of Starlan currency, bobs are copper coins with brass rims embossed with the symbol of the **Starlan Synod** on one side (an eight-pointed star) and the **Tower of Gerla** on the other. Ten bobs make a **lume**; two-hundred bobs make a **star**.

**Breaker Insurrection**- The rebellion by the Breakers leading to men being prohibited from using magic.

**Breakers**- The male maegas who led a rebellion against the Starlan Synod, destroying the **Tower of Gerla**. Due to their actions, men were prohibited from using magic until the establishment of the **Kanari** Order.

**Charm**- A minor type of **making**.

**Chauke**- The Omaka word for friends (plural of *chaukeen*).

**Coppa**- A rare plant that only grows in a small area of southwestern **Starla**, its fibers are coveted for their ability to hold a magical charge, much like **dwimstone**.

**Church of Waylight-** The official name for the church of the believers who worship All-Mother **Illu** (its followers are often called **Waylighters**).

**Cursekin-** The common name for the gnolls inhabiting the central part of **Ibien**. They are a savage people who attack and raid across the heart of the continent. It is believed that their violent ways are the result of a curse.

**Cursekin Badlands-** The name for the vast core of the **Ibien** continent where the **cursekin** roam.

**Darna / Darnans-** The large island home and people from Darna who migrated to the **Eru Peninsula** and eventually became the **Starlans**. They were mostly humans and forced to flee when volcanic eruptions and other natural disasters rendered the island uninhabitable.

**Deseria-** The name for the world. Deseria has two major known continents, **Ibien** and **Elen**, connected by the thin Arou Isthmus.

**Du'kel-** Known as the Shadow Lord by the followers of **Illu** (**Waylighters**), his own followers (the **Skaedas**), believe he is the god of shadow, darkness and destruction and call him Du'kel or Father Shadow. Waylighters fear him for his cruelty and immorality, believing that he seeks to corrupt the unwary, drawing them away from their dedication to righteousness and **All-Mother Illu**.

**Dweoma Magic-** One of the two types of **Illu** and **spirit magic**. Dweoma magic involves **makings** where the user draws energy from a source, usually **dwimstone** or **coppa** fabric, to produce a **making**. The other type of **Illu** and spirit magic is **maega magic**.  
*Notes:* Practitioners of dweoma magic are called *dweomas*. About twenty to thirty in one hundred have the ability to use dweoma magic.

**Dwimrail-** A system of rail cars built across the **Starlan Federation** by **House Hussana** using **dwimstone** as its power source.

**Dwimshield-** A common **charm** often worked into wands, it creates a defensive shield, usually of a faint blue color, able to block

magical and non-magical objects. A dwimshield can also absorb some of the force of a blow, as well as extreme heat and cold and other magical effects, if the person working the charm focuses on these abilities. As a result, dwimshields are particularly useful against magical attacks and in hostile environments.

**Dwimstone-** Also known as dweoma crystal, dwimstone is a crystal found underground, which can be attuned to certain magics, allowing it to store energy that can then be used to power **dweoma magic**.

**Eldoga-** Contests of physical prowess, such as wrestling, archery and running that commonly occur during **Tiwokan**.

**Elen-** The eastern continent of **Deseria**, home to the humans of **Noriz** and **Terla**, gnomes of **Arotak**, and the **elves** of Olitar, Felitar and Noctar, among others.

**Elves-** A diminutive people inhabiting the eastern coast of the **Elen** continent.

**Enarodi-** One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known for farming and hunting in the foothills west of the Falanin Mountains.

**Eru-** The name for the indigenous peoples of the lands colonized by the **Starlans**. Each nation of **Eru** has a name for themselves, such as **Atnali**, **Omaka** or **Ishkane**.

**Eru Peninsula-** The knuckle of land on the northeastern edge of the **Ibien** continent of **Deseria** where the **Eru** people have lived for thousands of years and where the refugees from **Darna** settled, becoming the **Starlans** and establishing **Starla**.

**Fading, The-** The name for a wasting disease common among people who live in **Starla City**, especially those who live below ground. In its early stages, it causes chronic fatigue and one's skin, hair and eye color to take on a pale gray hue, eventually consuming the body and leading to death. It also makes one more sensitive to magic. The Fading's effects can advance rapidly and in some cases cause mutations, tumors and death.

**Flow, The-** The source of magical energy for those using **Illu** magic, believed to come from All-Mother **Illu** herself.



**Gahnee-** A card game popularized by the **Mercosi** but now common in **Starla**, parts of **Noriz** and even ports in other lands. It is played with a deck consisting of seven suits (water, wind, earth, sun, life, death, and spirit\* [\*changed to the **flow** in **Starla** to avoid censorship as a pagan game]). Each suit has common cards numbered one through five and then four quality cards: the thief, champion, healer and mage (maega in Starla). There are also two wilds: the virgin (All-Mother in Starla) and the trickster (Shadow Lord in Starla).

A number of winning-hand combinations are possible, the highest being a run of quality cards of the same suit plus the virgin or All-Mother (best) or trickster or Shadow Lord (second best).

**Gemwire-** A system of communications built by the great Illu **House Kjosa** using lines of crushed **dwimstone** and specialized gems, allowing agents of House Kjosa to send messages between stations on the gemwire network.

**Golnari-** The realm of the orcs, an insular people with a strong connection to nature. Across Deseria they are acknowledged as the finest bladecrafter. Their lands sit in the northwestern part of the **Ibien** continent.

**Golnari Lockboxes-** Extremely popular devices, these boxes are crafted to resist damage from magical and physical attacks and are reputed to be immune to safecracking efforts; they are nearly impossible to move once their magic is active.

**Gnolls-** See **Cursekin**.

**Gnomes-** The short, insectoid humanoids who mostly live in **Arotak** along the southwestern part of the **Elen** continent of **Deseria**.

**Heallheim-** The heaven-like paradise where **Waylighters** believe they will go in their afterlife if they are judged worthy by **All-Mother Illu**.

**High, The-** A term used to refer to the elites of **Starla**, particularly those who are associated with one of the great **Illu houses**.

**Highman-** A term for a man among **the high**.

**House Anlaith-** One of the great **Illu houses** that is known for producing devices and magics that aid in healing.

**House Bilala-** One of the great **Illu houses** known for producing items and magics destructive in nature, often utilizing light and fire.

**House Corasee-** One of the great **Illu houses** known for producing items and magics that aid in growth, particularly for agricultural applications.

**House Gesuleen-** One of the great **Illu houses** known for items and magic related to architecture and construction.

**House Keylani-** One of the great **Illu houses** known for producing weapons and defensive items both magical and mundane, as well as clothing, often magical in nature.

**House Kjosa-** One of the great **Illu houses** known for devices and services aiding in communications, such as the **gemwire network** and memory ambers.

**House Hussana-** One of the great **Illu houses** known for producing items and magics related to transportation, such as the **dwimrail** network across Starla and the street cars in **Starla City**.

**House Merta-** One of the great **Illu houses** known for producing goods for a range of industries, particularly **makery** implements, agricultural machinas, trinkets and wands, and other items, mostly magical in nature.

**Idias-** One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** who traditionally farmed and herded in the dry lands along the eastern part of the **Southern Reaches**.

**Ibien-** The western continent of **Deseria**, home to the humans of **Starla**, the trolls of Schlud, dwarves of Dawon, goblins of I'tan, orcs of **Golnar** and **olumay**, among others.

**Ikin-** Also known as the Great Wolf, Ikin is the numen god of the **Ikkina**.

**Ikkina-** One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien**, the Ikkina hunted the grasslands along the eastern and southern parts of the **Southern Reaches** and into the **Cursekin Badlands**. They are noteworthy

for being able to move safely within the **Cursekin Badlands** and for never being conquered and colonized by the **Starlans**.

**Illu**- More formally known as **All-Mother Illu**, this is the goddess of the Illu faith but can also refer to the religion of those who worship this deity.

**Illu Houses**- The powerful groups, originally organized around a family or group of families, and using **Illu magic** to drive industry. Each of the great Illu houses possesses a circle of maegas whose magical works produce incredible wealth for the house.

**Illu Magic**- Magic granted to the faithful who serve and worship **All-Mother Illu**, most of these magics involve fire, creation and healing.

**Ishkane**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known for foraging, farming and fishing the wetlands in the northwestern part of the **Eru Peninsula**.

**Kaling**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known for foraging, farming and fishing the rainforests in the northeastern part of the **Eru Peninsula**.

**Kanari**- The organization of men who can use **maega** and **dweoma magic**. They are tasked with protecting against harmful magics and investigating unlawful uses of magic in **Starla**.

**Kekosi**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** who traditionally farmed the semi-arid grasslands on the western edge of the **Southern Reaches**.

**Lightbound**- A small sect of fanatics who believe all magic is evil and that it threatens the natural lifeforces of **Deseria**. They have singled out the magics of **Starla** as the greatest evil, trying to turn the world against Starla and its pernicious influence. In response, Starla has labeled the Lightbound a terrorist group and works to root them out wherever they try to establish a base of support.

**Lightbound Rebellion**- Beginning in 991 Starlan Era (SA), the **Lightbound** established an independent republic on the southern border of **Starlan** territory, naming this settlement First Light and proclaiming it the capital of a new Lightbound Republic.

From this base the Lightbound called on all **Eru** to escape their lives under their Starlan mastras and join a new utopia free of Starlan manipulations, where the Lightbound would lead a revolution to reclaim the land and glory of the Eru past. Instead, the Starlan army attacked the settlement, destroying most of it and killing and imprisoning the Eru who'd come seeking a new future free of Starla.

**Long Silence, The-** What the Eru call the time when many spirit magics began to fail and the people could no longer communicate with the numen gods.

**Lumes (Currency)-** The intermediate denomination of Starlan currency, lumes are silver coins with bronze rims. Twenty lumes make a **star** while ten **bobs** make a lume.

**Maega Magic-** One of the two types of Illu and spirit magic. Maega magic involves the user drawing on energy from **the flow** or **spirit world** to power a **making**. Roughly five in one hundred have the ability to use maega magic.

*Notes:* Practitioners of maega magic are often called *maegas*. The other type of Illu and spirit magic is **dweoma magic**.

**Makery-** The name for a facility or set of facilities where goods are manufactured.

**Making-** The name given to most acts of magic, a making involves some sort of **sigil**, a source of magic and in some cases other reagents (objects used or consumed to produce the making).

*Notes:* In **Illu** and **spirit magic**, the **sigil** can be physical, usually markings on an object, gestures or words spoken by someone creating a making, or even a mental image. The energy needed for a making is drawn from another realm, such as the **spirit world** or **the flow**, either directly (by someone with **maega-magic** ability) or through an object that stores such energy (in the case of dwimstone or coppa as used by someone with **dweoma-magic** ability).

**Malis Naur-** The realm of the ogres on the large island of Tral in the **Orkala Sea**. Malis Naur is extremely dry and arid although it is surrounded by some of the most treacherous seas in Deseria.

**Matron**- A term of address for **Starlan** women in good standing (upper- and middle-class women), it doesn't just refer to mothers but all such women, who are seen as the mothers of the Starlan nation and its people.

**Mercos / Mercosi**- An island nation of mostly humans in the northern part of the **Ulara Sea**, closer to **Elen** than **Ibien**.

**Nerrea**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known for farming and herding in the dry lands in the south of the **Southern Reaches**.

**Noriz / Norizians**- A nation of mostly humans living in the western part of the **Elen** continent as it approaches the Arou Isthmus, which connects the Elen and **Ibien** continents.

**Nuisan**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien**, known for being hunter gatherers in the forests at the heart of the Falanin Mountains of the **Southern Reaches**.

**Numen Gods**- These are powerful beings from the **spirit world** who serve as guardians and protectors for the **Eru** peoples.

**Olumay**- A squirrel-like species of small humanoids who live in the **Cursekin Badlands**. They have developed systems of traps and lures to herd the **cursekin** gnolls away from their settlements, which are mostly built high up in giant oaks and ancient pines so the savage gnolls cannot easily attack them.

**Omaka**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** who lived and farmed riverlands in the western part of the **Southern Reaches** before the **Starlan** occupation claimed their lands. The Omaka are noteworthy as being the only people on whose ancestral lands **coppa** grows.

**Orkala Sea**- The sea south of the Arou Isthmus separating the **Elen** and **Ibien** continents.

**Presidio**- The island prison where men who could use magic were sent, located in Starlan Bay. The Presidio eventually became the **Kanari**'s base of operations (in addition to continuing as a prison).

**Questioners**- An order within the **Church of Waylight** dedicated to defending against those who would pervert, corrupt or deceive the faithful. The zealous application of their efforts led to bitter tension

with the **Eru** of northern and central **Starla**. As a result, they were relieved of their role as primary investigators of magical misuses throughout Starla with the **Kanari** taking their place.

**Rings**- A game using several hoops hanging from the branches of a tree. The hoops swing back and forth in front of a target. Each person throws a knife at the target, scoring points depending on how close to the center they get and how many hoops their blade passes through.

**Salea**- A large, flightless bird similar in size and shape to an emu.

**Salsan / Salsani**- An island nation in the **Ulara Sea** between the **Ibien** and **Elen** continents, south of **Darna** and southwest of **Mercos**; it is comprised mostly of humans and ruled by half elves.

**Saykeb**- Dancing exhibitions held between **Eru** nations, usually during **Tiwokan**.

**Semat**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known as farmers and herders working the semi-arid grasslands on the central-southern part of the **Southern Reaches**.

**Sigil**- The language of magical **makings** as well as the conduit through which the makings come into being (serving as gateways for the magic). A sigil could be a physical symbol, an image held in the mind, gestures forming the shape of the sigil in the air or even spoken language.

Understanding the language of sigils for a particular type of magic can take days, weeks or even years, but once the user understands this sigil language, they can make sense of most sigils with that sigil-magic language (e.g., **Illu magic** or **spirit magic**).

*Note:* Some magic users tattoo sigils on their bodies or work them into objects they carry, such as wands or staves.

**Silverbark**- The bark of the bleachpine tree, which grows in high elevations across the **Starlan Federation** and is valued for its qualities as a hallucinogen and anesthetic. Generally, it is smoked to achieve its effects.

**Skaedas**- The name for those who worship **Du'kel**, the Shadow Lord. In Starla, any discovered following Du'kel are executed as heretics, enemies of Starla and the **Illu** faith.

**Soalee**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known as fishers and hunter gatherers working the lush forests and coasts along the northeast of the Eru Peninsula.

**Sorelen Sea**- The sea north of the **Ibien** continent.

**Southern Reaches**- The name for the region of southern and western **Starla** between the Falanin Mountains and the **Cursekin Badlands**.

**Spirit Magic**- Magic drawn from the **spirit world**. Spirit magic is a type of magic used by many **Eru** peoples, though when the **Starlans** conquered the **Eru Peninsula**, they prohibited the use of spirit magic, killing any they found using it.

**Spirit World**- The home of the **Eru** ancestors and other spirits, such as the **numen gods**.

**Starla City**- The great capital city of the **Starlan Federation**, home to three million people from all over the world, and the base of operations for the great **Illu houses** and most of the lesser ones as well.

**Starla / Starlan Federation**- More commonly known as **Starla**, the Starlan Federation is the richest and most powerful nation in **Deseria**, established by refugees who came from the island nation of **Darna** after a series of catastrophes devastated the land and drove its inhabitants into exile. Starla occupies the **Eru Peninsula**.

**Starlans**- The name for the citizens of **Starla**. It mostly refers to those of **Darnan** ancestry.

**Stars (Currency)**- The major denomination of **Starlan** currency, stars are made from star silver (ground dwimstone and silver) and have a gold rim. Twenty **lumes** make a star; two-hundred **bobs** make a star.

**Synod**- Also known as the Synod of Thirteen, the Synod rules both the capital **Starla City** and the federation (with twelve members, one for each of the twelve great **Illu houses** and a thirteenth member representing the high priestess of the **Church of Waylight**).

In essence, the Synod represents the magical elite, the oligarchy controlling much of the wealth of **Starla**. The Synod technically enacts the will of the **Assembly**, which in turn speaks with the voice of the **Starlan** people.

**Tarshi**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known for farming the dry lands in the southeastern part of the **Eru Peninsula**.

**Teotona**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** traditionally known for hunting the grasslands of the central-eastern **Eru Peninsula**.

**Terla / Terlans**- A nation of mostly humans living in the northwestern part of the **Elen** continent. Most Terlans worship the sun god Ela, the sacred flame of life. It was a sect of Ela-following Terlans who founded the **Lightbound**.

**Tiwokan**- The name for regular festivals among different groups of Eru peoples, usually involving trade, feasting, dancing, competitions and other ceremonies.

**Tower of Gerla**- Also known as the Broken Tower of Gerla, it was once the capitol building of **Starla**, a floating tower built in the heart of **Starla City**. For hundreds of years it was seen as a shining example of the tremendous progress and boundless possibility Starla had brought to the **Eru Peninsula** and the refugees who fled the destruction of **Darna**.

The Tower of Gerla was destroyed by male maegas during the **Breaker Insurrection**, leading to the outlaw of magic by men throughout Starla.

**Ulara Sea**- The sea north of the Arou Isthmus separating the **Elen** and **Ibien** continents.

**Umpa Numuku**- The lake of grass, the **Ikkina** name for vast prairies in the **Cursekin Badlands**, stretching from the **Eru Peninsula** to the interior of the **Ibien** continent.

**Unala**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** who traditionally farmed the dry lands in the southeast of the **Eru Peninsula**.

**Waylighters**- The name for those who believe in **All-Mother Illu** and follow the Illu faith popular among **Starlans**.



**Yantra**- One of the **Eru** peoples of **Ibien** who traditionally subsisted as hunter gatherers in the Falanin Mountains of the **Eru Peninsula**.

## **Appendix II: Timeline**

*3 Before Starla Era* (BE) (996 years ago)- The Doom of Darna. Refugees from Darna begin establishing new settlements on the coast of present-day Starla.

*1 Starlan Era* (SE) (992 years ago)- Dwimstone deposits are found in and around what would become Starla City. Darnan refugees start settling all along the northern coast of the Eru Peninsula, encroaching on the lands of local Eru peoples. Starla City is founded, former Darnans coalescing into a people and expatriates living in other nations, mainly Mercos and Salsan, emigrating to the new Starla Federation.

*3 SE* (990 years ago)- The Synod, the ruling body of the Starlan Federation, forms. People from all over Deseria come to Starla City to make it rich by dwimstone mining. The Starlans begin restricting immigration from certain groups, giving priority to former Darnans.

*95 SE* (898 years ago)- Spirit magic is banned by the Starlan Synod.

*~230 SE* (760 years ago)- The Long Silence begins; numen gods no longer respond to Eru people's prayers, many spirit magics fail and Starlan conquest of the Eru Peninsula intensifies.

*725 SE* (268 years ago)- Two thirds of present-day Starla has now been brought under Starlan control.

*768 SE* (225 years ago)- Breaker Insurrection. Tower of Gerla is destroyed.

*781 SE* (212 years ago)- Southern Reaches conquered down to Brador, save for Atnali, Ikkina, some pockets of Yantra in the mountains and Nuisan deeper within their forest homelands.

812 SE (181 year ago)- Kanari order established as pressure applied to Starla.

832 SE (161 years ago)- Starlans finally find and capture the Atnali nomads, pressuring them into helping hunt down the Ikkina.

834 SE (159 years ago)- Ikkina driven from Starlan territory and the last Atnali bands come onto the Preserve.

850 SE (143 years ago)- Starlans ban traditional Eru dance and storytelling.

938 SE (55 years ago)- Starlan raids on Omaka nation begin, the final push to the border of modern Starla.

942 SE (51 years ago)- Omaka nation conquest completed, bands relocated to Omaka Preserve.

950 SE (43 years ago)- **Eagles Claws** movement founded. Within three years branches of the group have cropped up in Starla City and many of the trade towns across northern and central Starla. Two years later, one of the founders is assassinated, another is imprisoned and several other leaders are incarcerated or die under suspicious circumstances. However, the work the Eagles Claws did has brought worldwide attention to the situation of the Eru, forcing Starla to deal more evenhandedly with Eru, at least on the surface.

991 SE (2 years ago)- Lightbound Rebellion occurs, the Lightbound declaring independence from Starla and the Starlan army attacking First Light.

993 SE- Events of *The Quartermaestra* begin.

## About the Author

A lifelong reader of fantasy and science fiction, Mark Veldon spent the better part of a decade as an advertising copywriter and editor before investing another decade as a high-school English teacher. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his partner.

*The Quartermastra* is his debut novel.

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