

Prologue

Keiyan fell.

Wind rushed against wind and thundered past his body, pulling his hair back to flutter in the air behind him. Cold blasts of air chilled his flesh; he spun helplessly in his descent. He struggled, trying to free his arms and his wings, but the rough, sturdy cords held firm. Thousands of feet of air still stood between him and the ground, but the distance rapidly decreased. Keiyan breathed hard; it wouldn't be long before he hit.

A howl of anguish ripped past his lips. How could this have happened? His body toppled in his descent, and he lost sight of the ground, instead staring up toward the nuvela above. If only he had been more careful planning their revolution against their father. If only he hadn't run so close to the edge of the nuvela. If only the airomancer hadn't—

But there was nothing he could do about that now.

Keiyan's arms and wings strained against the cords, but the cords only bit deeper into his flesh. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He wasn't strong enough to break them or free himself from them.

He was going to die.

Tears threatened to spring to Keiyan's eyes, but he choked them back. He was stronger than that. His breath came out heavy and he tried to keep his throat from clenching up. Why couldn't he have been more careful in crafting their rebellion? Memories of the last fight he had with his sister came crashing into his mind, followed quickly by memories of the last fight he had with his brother. Two siblings estranged from him in one night.

He had really ruined things, hadn't he?

Keiyan passed by a low-floating unstable nuvela about a hundred wing-beats away. That was the last of them. Now there was nothing but open air between him and the ever-approaching ground.

Keiyan clenched his teeth together. Without him, his brother would be killed and his sister left abandoned. The citizens of Berkha Tor would never know true freedom. And his father would rule Berkha Tor with the smug arrogance of knowing he had foiled his sons' perfectly planned rebellion.

He had to do *something*.

Unfortunately, he had just over half a minute before he died from impact.

Part One: Before

Chapter One

The day before Telior and Keiyan set in motion the chain of events that would lead to Keiyan's fall, Telior, Shepherd of Athia, stood on the top of the bluffs overlooking the fields. The Sanctuary of Aeor loomed behind him like a spectre. A large horn within the sanctuary blew to signal the end of the priests' daily prayers for the people.

"So has it been spoken, so may Aeor do." The weary rote chorus trickled its way up from the workers in the fields.

Telior didn't say anything.

For that, of course, would presume that the priests had said any real prayers for the people.

Telior unfurled his wings. The harsh day's wind blew the black leather wings taut behind him. Without another backward glance, Telior threw himself off the bluffs and began to glide over the fields. The fields stretched out for nearly two miles before they hit the edge of the floating island they lived on; everything beyond was open sky.

Everything he could *see* at least was open sky.

But now, according to the governor's scouts, another floating island was coming their way. This floating island was a decently-prosperous nuvela slightly larger than their nuvela. The governor, of course, had his own plans to get rich trading supplies he'd earned from the Shacklers' sweat and blood.

Telior had other plans.

Finally spotting his twin brother, Telior angled his wings against the wind and flew down toward him. Keiyan was walking away from him through the fields of carallel in determined fashion. He hadn't noticed Telior yet. As Telior drew closer, he saw what his brother was walking toward. Then he understood.

Telior's nostrils flared. He folded his wings and landed, legs buckling on impact. Telior straightened, then walked quickly after Keiyan. Stalks of carallel brushed against his legs. He could hear the cries already.

Ahead, one of the nobles' taskmasters hovered over a quivering Shackler with a wooden rod that gleamed in the midday sun. The Shackler's doubled-over back hinted at what the taskmaster had already done. As Telior walked up toward them, despite the adrenaline in his chest, he didn't know what to do.

But that, of course, was why Keiyan was there first.

“Stop,” Keiyan said as he stalked over.

The taskmaster looked up from the Shackler he had been beating. His face went sour. “This is none of your business, son of Veilon. This here is a good-for-nothing Shackler who isn’t doing his work and needs to be taught a lesson.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion,” Keiyan said, crossing his arms. “I gave an order as your superior.”

The taskmaster glowered, but he landed on the ground in deference. Telior slowly exhaled. He hadn’t been sure if the taskmaster would listen to Keiyan or not.

Keiyan turned toward the Shackler. He was quivering less now, but he was still hunched over. As Telior walked up beside his brother, he got a better view of the man. The man had only barely hit his second century of life, but premature lines and wrinkles criss-crossed across his face.

Keiyan knelt down next to the man and put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry I couldn’t intervene sooner,” he said. “Can I get you some water?”

The man nodded in response. Keiyan grabbed one of the many water skins he kept on his side and, after moving it across his chest toward the hunched-over man, squeezed the water into the man’s mouth. Keiyan regularly went into the fields with several skins of water to provide relief for the laboring Shacklers.

The taskmaster stared at him in silent rage for a moment before flying off. Telior smirked. Keiyan showed him who was in charge.

As Telior stood beside his brother, he could see how close they were to the Drop. A couple feet away, the nuvela fell away beneath them in a hole that went right through the nuvela. Telior stepped closer and glanced down into it. Miles of open sky lay between him and the distant earth far below.

By this point, Keiyan had finished giving water to the Shackler and had moved over to Telior. “I didn’t realize you were with me for that,” Keiyan’s voice came from behind. Telior turned to see his brother next to him, the water skins back at his side and the Shackler working again a wing-beat away.

“What are you doing?” Keiyan continued. “Do you want to join me in my travels today?”

Telior turned toward Keiyan. If only he knew how to comfort people like Keiyan did. It would be fitting for a Shepherd. But no. Instead, the Shepherd of Athia fumbled to do the right things, and the atheist took up the task of relieving the poor workers of Berkha Tor.

“I’m actually here for something else,” Telior said. His heart pounded as he considered the possibilities of what he was about to say. “Veilon just heard from his scouts that a nuvela is coming up fast and will pass by tomorrow. It’s called Arceture, and it has a vibrant economy, complete with a bustling black market.”

Keiyan’s eyes widened. “A nuvela with a large black market on the second of the month?” he asked. “It’s too good to overlook.” He paused. “It’s sooner than I was planning for.”

“I know,” Telior said, trying to keep too much excitement from bubbling over into his voice. “But Veilon’s doing inventory today, so we’d have a full month to train our men before Veilon he does inventory again and discovers the theft. If we don’t act now, it may be years until we pass a nuvela this large right after Veilon does inventory. We need to do it.”

Keiyan’s brow furrowed. “Do you think we can do it?”

“I prayed to the Goddess as soon as I heard it and Her divine spark inside me said yes.”

Keiyan sighed. “You know I don’t care for that.”

It was hard to relate to Keiyan sometimes. Telior took a deep breath as he tried to calm his energetic nerves. “We always knew we’d have to act on short notice,” Telior said. “I know I don’t know the details like you do. But I’m ready to do this.”

Keiyan considered this. “A month isn’t much time to pull everything together.”

“We already have all our fighting men set up. We may need to escalate the training. But it’s what you always say: we need to act, and not simply speak. It’s been long enough for Berkha Tor.”

“You’re right,” Keiyan finally said, and his gaze locked with Telior’s. “It *has* been long enough.” He looked around. “Which direction is it coming from? When will we pass it?”

Telior gestured across the fields. “That direction. It’s coming from the direction Berkha Tor has been drifting toward the past several weeks, so we should pass it around noon tomorrow.”

“Doesn’t give us much time,” Keiyan said, and he wiped his face. “Veilon won’t finish inventory until later today, so can you steal the beads tomorrow morning?”

Telior nodded, a grin breaking out on his face. “I know who the guards are. I can bribe them.”

“Good,” Keiyan said, and he looked down at his water skins. “Guess I’m done with this for the day.” He looked back up at Telior. “Find Srial and see if she can scout out the nuvela. I need to talk to Yerelor about getting fake bottoms for the storage containers tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Telior said. “I’ll do it.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

The twins took off into the air and the nuvela fell away beneath them. As he began to fly toward the Shackles to find Srial, Telior couldn’t keep a grin from spreading across his face anymore. Sixteen years after their father sold their sister to keep his governorship, they were finally ready to wage their revolution. They would get the weapons they needed from the passing nuvela.

And they would use it to kill him.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Keiyan walked into Yerelor's warehouse and scanned their base of operations. Workers were fitting the last of the false bottoms into the storage containers that lined the floor. Everything was according to plan.

"Good to see you Keiyan," Yerelor said as he walked toward him. He was the sole Freeholder in their movement. "We're fully prepared to transport the swords." He paused and raised his bushy black eyebrows. "You *have* confirmed that there are swords you can purchase on the nuvela, haven't you?"

Keiyan nodded. "Just talked with Srial this morning. She did some scouting and gave me the name of a black market contact. There's only one sword seller, but he has a huge stash. Telior and I will set off immediately as soon as he returns. Have you seen him?"

Yerelor shook his head. Half his muscular body moved with him as he shook his head. "Haven't seen him since he left to steal the beads."

Keiyan frowned. "He should have returned by now. We need to get going." His foot tapped against the dirt floor.

Twenty minutes later, Telior burst through the open doors on the other side of the room. "Sorry I'm late," he said as he flew up to them. "I've got them." He held up a bag of magenta junipa beads.

Keiyan ran a hand through his hair. "About time," Keiyan said. "You were supposed to be back before me."

Telior panted. "Stealing them from Veilon wasn't easy. If you had seen how many servants were running around the palace, you'd understand why I'm late. The guards were more resistant to bribery as well. But it all worked out in the end." He quickly opened up the bag of junipa beads and took one of them out. The bead was as big as an eyeball. He held the bead out toward Keiyan.

Keiyan took the bead and slid it into his pocket. "Veilon's men have already left for Arceture," he said. "We have two hours before they leave, which isn't much time to find the dealer and get the swords off the nuvela. Are you ready to go?"

Telior quickly retied the bag of beads and gave the bag to Yerelor. "I need to be," he said. "You know what you're doing with these, Yerelor?"

Yerelor's expression soured. "Of course."

“Good. Don’t lose our small fortune.”

“He won’t,” Keiyan said, not wanting to offend Yerelor any further. “Let’s go.”

Keiyan beat his wings, rising off the ground, and began to fly toward the doors Telior had come through. He could hear Telior right behind him as they passed through the doors. They quickly gained altitude as they flew across the wharfs, over the houses of the Freeholders—those lucky enough to work for themselves instead of the nobles—and toward the fields. The nuvela of Arceture loomed large now beyond the fields. The nuvela wouldn’t pass directly above Berkha Tor, but it would be close when it drifted past.

Keiyan looked around. To their right, above the upper cliffs, a forest of ouf trees covered most of the upper plateau of Berkha Tor. Their father’s palace peaked up through the trees. Keiyan quickly glanced toward the left. He saw the symbol of his father’s oppression too often. As he glanced to his left, he could make out the edges of the twisting lower plateau that made up the Shackles, where most of the inhabitants of Berkha Tor lived. Now that was what home looked like.

Keiyan and Telior built up speed as they flew high over the edge of Berkha Tor and ascended toward Arceture. Abnormally high cliffs awaited them. They flew side-by-side, as usual.

“So you never explained the geography of this nuvela to me,” Telior said. “What’s this place look like?”

“Well, as you can see, it’s pretty tall on this side,” Keiyan said, gesturing toward Arceture. “The whole nuvela has the basic shape of a crescent: the two tips are pointed away from us. The outer part of the crescent, facing toward us, is the thickest; the nuvela then slopes downward as you move toward the inside of the crescent or move toward the two ends. The population lives in a corridor down the middle of the crescent; their farms stretching out from that corridor to both ends of the island. It creates a basic caste system, too: the richer you are, the higher up you live on the corridor.”

“A housing arrangement based on caste,” Telior muttered. “What a surprise.”

“Tell me about it.”

Telior scratched his chin. “I suppose it’s just Drecht’s Theory of Separation in practice. Man enforces his internal prejudices on reality to reinforce those prejudices.”

Keiyan smiled. “I doubt they thought that when they arranged the city this way.”

“They didn’t *directly* think about that. But that’s what they subconsciously thought.”

“I think they just like having an elite section of the town,” Keiyan said as he angled his wings to better catch the wind draft. “It helps them feel proud about themselves.”

“Keiyan—that’s exactly what Drecht’s theory says.”

“If that’s what Drecht’s theory is, you need to explain it better. Perhaps that’s the problem with philosophical language.”

Telior sighed. “Someday I’ll convince you this matters.”

“When your theories make a practical difference, let me know,” Keiyan said. “In the meanwhile, I’ll fix the real world.” Keiyan bit his tongue as soon as those words flew out his mouth. That was harsher than he had intended. Especially since Telior had been really helpful these past couple days. But living was more than reading philosophy. And Telior often forgot about that.

“Once we overthrow Veilon, my theories *will* make a practical difference,” Telior pointed out.

“One step at a time,” Keiyan said. It was true that Telior’s theories were helpful in planning out their approaching rule. “Let’s overthrow Veilon first.” They were close to Arceture now. Keiyan looked at it carefully. The cliffs were higher than he originally realized.

“Not to change the topic,” Keiyan said. “But this nuvela is big. When you heard about Arceture from the original scout, did he say how large it was? Srial wasn’t able to learn the population numbers.”

“He did...” Telior said. “I don’t remember what he said, though. It may have been twenty thousand people, may have been thirty thousand. Possibly forty thousand.”

“Maneuvering around a population center of twenty thousand is much different from maneuvering around forty thousand,” Keiyan remarked.

“My fault. Minor details like that have a habit of slipping my mind.”

“A difference of twenty thousand is hardly a minor detail,” Keiyan grumbled. This was another problem. Telior thought about the big picture a lot, but the big picture does no good without a path to get there.

“Sorry,” Telior said. “I’ll try to remember next time. Where are we headed here?”

“Srial didn’t have enough time to find the sword dealer,” Keiyan said as they began scaling the last dozen wing-beats of the nuvela. “We’ll have to ask people where he is.”

With that, they finished their ascent and soared over the edge of Arceture to overlook the nuvela which spread out beneath them. As Srial said, in front of them, a long collection of buildings cut a swathe down the center of the crescent-shaped island. Keiyan and Telior hovered on the brink of the nuvela for a moment before Keiyan turned toward Telior

“Ready?” he said.

“Let’s do it,” Telior said. They swooped down toward the city. Buildings began rushing by on either side of them. Weaving their way between them, Keiyan and Telior began to maneuver their way toward the bottom of the nuvela. The nuvela was divided into several ledges which split the different sections of the population center into terraces. The buildings toward the top of the crescent were taller and wider, as was to be expected from the houses of the rich.

“This is a mighty large population center,” Keiyan mused as they neared the lower half of the nuvela. “I’m guessing it’s somewhere between thirty and forty thousand.”

“No kidding,” Telior replied. “Enough to force Veilon to an awfully-low profit margin.”

“Nothing we’ll worry about,” Keiyan said. “The old man deserves to have it handed to him.” They quickly moved down from the wealthy sections of the city to the poorer sections. The buildings became smaller and their decorations less ornate. It was in the middle of the work day, so few fylen were around, but some had begun coming back for lunch break. Keiyan passed several of them as he flew. There was something odd about them. He began to study them more carefully.

Oh. “Have you noticed that everyone has a notch cut out of their ears?” Keiyan asked.

“They have what?” Telior asked.

“You might notice if you used your eyes more,” Keiyan replied. “Look at their ears; they all have small notches cut off toward the top.”

Telior looked around. “It must be a distinctive mark of Arceture. Maybe a religious mark, but actually, I wouldn’t be surprised if it had religious *and* political implications.”

“Good point,” Keiyan said. “Nothing boosts patriotism more than religion backing the state.”

Telior sighed. “You don’t need to make potshots at religion every chance you get.”

“No, but it makes things more interesting,” Keiyan said as he looked around. “We’ll stand out without those marks, but hopefully not much. Let’s ask around to find this dealer. The dealer’s name is Nycra.”

Telior nodded. “Let’s split up.”

Keiyan spun away from Telior and began approaching the different fylen flying about. The first twenty six people he approached only gave him blank stares and cautious glances at his ears, but the twenty seventh person spoke differently.

“Nycra? No—I’ve never even heard of that name,” the fylen responded. He was a bad liar.

“Don’t know him?” Keiyan asked. “So where is this man you don’t know about?”

“What are you talking about?” the fylen asked, flustered. “I’ve no clue where he lives. Now if you can just move aside and leave me be-”

“Telior,” Keiyan hollered. He was only six wing-beats away. “You want to come over here?” While Keiyan could competently get things done, Telior had more of a way with rhetoric. He turned back toward the man trying to get away. “Listen—neither of us are threats to you or Nycra; we’re not officials.”

“People say a lot when they want something,” the fylen replied. “I see the two swords on your belt and the sword your doppelganger has. Is he your thug?”

“No,” Telior said as he moved next to Keiyan. “Listen, I know we have swords, and I understand your assumption, but we’re really not officials. There’s a nuvela passing by Arceture today; we’re from that nuvela. Look at our ears if you doubt us—we don’t have the markings your people have. We’re foreigners who want to do business with Nycra.”

The fylen glanced at their ears. His agitated composure became slightly-more relaxed—Telior’s gentle tone and compelling words had a way of doing that to people—but he still seemed tense. “Well, that’s certainly a fair point. But that doesn’t mean I have to tell you nothing.”

“I have two loaves of carallel bread in my bag,” Keiyan said, opening up the satchel strapped onto his chest. He pulled out two small loaves. “It’s not much, but your nuvela doesn’t grow carallel, so it may be a welcome respite from your diet.”

The fylen thought for a moment. “Alright, give them to me,” the fylen said, seizing the loaves. He looked around before speaking. “If anyone asks, you didn’t hear it from me. Go up

three *teria* and take an immediate right. After three buildings, you'll come to a woodcarving shop. Talk to the clerk about what you want and he'll get you settled."

"A *teria*?" Keiyan asked. "I don't-

"They're the ledges that you'll see dividing this city. Take three of them up and follow my directions."

"You have our thanks," Telior said. "The blessings of the Goddess be upon you."

"Yeah, whatever; you as well," the fylen said as he flew off with the loaves. "Have fun doing business." And then he was gone.

"You know, this people probably doesn't worship Athia," Keiyan remarked.

"Doesn't mean they don't need her blessings."

"Whatever," Keiyan said. "I'm just glad your voice and my bread was enough to find Nycra. Let's go." His wings beat the air and he was off, Telior beside him. The gray houses whizzed by as they moved back up the city until they arrived at the third *teria*. Turning right, they passed by three large shops and then arrived at a smaller shop. The brothers flew above the shop and then dropped in through the entrance on the roof. Inside, wood carvings of animals, plants, and symbols hung on the circular walls. An older man stood behind a counter at the edge of the room. Keiyan and Telior immediately moved toward him.

"Welcome to the shop," the grey-haired man greeted them. He glanced at their ears and his tone immediately lost its pleasant quality. "It's not every day I get foreigners in my shop. Do you need something?" Keiyan pursed his lips. It wasn't like he expected a different kind of treatment. He'd let Telior take charge of this conversation. Once, he tried to handle these conversations himself. Then he realized how effective Telior was with his words.

"We're looking for someone," Telior replied as he leaned closer to the man. "We're from the nuvela of Berkha Tor, which is passing by Arceture today. We heard a man named Nycra worked here and we wanted to speak to him." Telior claimed the Goddess blessed him with words and Keiyan with actions. Keiyan suspected it had more to do with their upbringing.

The man's eyes narrowed, causing the scar across his cheek to stretch. "I am Nycra," he replied. "What do you want?"

"Only the opportunity to do good business," Telior said calmly. "Rumor says you're a dealer in weapons."

Nycra shifted his weight. “Rumor says a lot of things,” he replied. “If public rumor says I’m a weapons dealer, I’m a dead man.”

“We’re familiar with underground movements on our nuvela,” Telior replied, “so it’s easy to find like-minded individuals. We have valuable goods and are interested in a trade.”

“*If* I were a weapons dealer, my prices would be high,” Nycra replied carefully. “It’s been a while since we’ve passed one of the earth’s mountains, so we haven’t been able to purchase new iron for a while. Iron never comes cheap you know.”

“We’re rich men,” Telior replied. “Both of us are aware of the cost of importing iron from the earth and are ready to pay the price.”

“Very well then,” Nycra said. His wings unfurled and he suddenly flew past them, coasting toward the opening in the ceiling. Grabbing a handle, he pulled the wooden door over the opening and quickly locked it in place. Only the light emitting from the narrow wall slits illuminated the chamber.

“I don’t know what dealers you are accustomed to dealing with,” Nycra said as he flew down from the door, “but you will be hard-pressed to find a dealer more well-stocked than me.” He flew back toward the counter and turned his back to them. His hands moved across the wall, looking for something. Then he grasped some hidden handle and pulled. As they watched, a previously-unseen door opened up to reveal a hidden shaft.

“Follow me,” Nycra said, and he grabbed a thick glowing gerna branch from a barrel of water in the corner. No one knew why gerna branches glowed when wet, but no one questioned its usefulness.

Nycra dropped down into the shaft, the gerna branch illuminating his decent. Flying over the counter, the two brothers followed suit and dropped down after him. The shaft quickly opened into a hidden room below the store. Nycra was hovering in the middle of the room when they entered, holding the gerna branch to allow it to illuminate all the walls of the circular chamber.

“By the Goddess,” Telior whispered. Keiyan looked around in awe. He thought Nycra had just been bragging. But everything on the walls made it clear that wasn’t the case. Rows upon rows of swords lined the walls, along with scores of battle axes and dozens of spear-heads. This man had a fortune in this chamber.

“You said you were familiar with underground movements, so I assume you’ll understand my need for protection,” Nycra explained as two burly fylen flew up out of a

different shaft in the center of the room. “With possessions this valuable, one must always be cautious.”

“Of course,” Keiyan said, taking over the conversation from Telior. While Telior was better at soothing people and spurring them to action, Keiyan was a better negotiator. It was the one communication skill he had learned from his father when Veilon had once tried to train him as his replacement. Probably because it was the only communication skill Veilon had.

Keiyan flew closer to Nycra as Telior began examining the quality of the swords. “I would expect nothing else from a dealer like yourself,” Keiyan continued. “Here’s what we have to offer.” He dug into his pocket and held up the sole junipa bead he had kept. The magenta orb glistened in the light of the gerna staff. Nycra’s eyes widened as he stared at it.

“This is a junipa bead,” Keiyan explained. “Harvested from an albino junipa tree approximately six to seven hundred years ago. Examine it for yourself.” He dropped it into Nycra’s hands. Nycra stared at it in awe before his gaze hardened and he snapped back into his gruff personality.

“That is a valuable possession,” Nycra he said. He placed the bead back into Keiyan’s hands. “How much are you asking?”

“Depends on the quality of your stock,” Keiyan said.

“Feast your eyes on it,” Nycra said, gesturing at the walls around them. “What are you interested in? Swords? I have eighty nine, forged for war and of solid construction. Spearheads? I have fifty three ready to be fitted to staves. I even have a small collection of battle axes.”

“The swords are of sturdy construction, but many were heavily used,” Telior said as he flew toward them. “Several have notches and others are slightly-rusted,” Keiyan smiled. So Telior did know how to focus on details when he set his mind to it.

“We have both used and new swords here,” Nycra responded. “Choose what you want and make your offer. I will give you three of our best swords for the junipa bead.”

“Not a terrible bargain,” Keiyan said. “But we’re aiming for something larger. We want to equip a small army.”

Nycra’s white eyebrows narrowed. “A junipa bead is valuable, but not *that* valuable. Perhaps I could exchange five used weapons for the bead. You could make a case for six. But even used swords are a valuable commodity.”

Did this dealer think he was an idiot? In that case, he may have some fun with this. “I am well aware of the price of swords,” Keiyan replied. “Which is why I want your whole stock of swords.”

Nycra stared at him for one long moment. “Are you insane? If you think a junipa bead is anywhere near that valuable, I-”

“We have *twenty* junipa beads,” Keiyan interrupted. “We only brought one here. We’ll give you all of them for your stock.”

Nycra’s eyes widened. “By Elyon,” he swore. “Are you the rulers of Berkha Tor? Where have you acquired such a fortune?!”

“Your fortune in swords is equal to ours in beads,” Keiyan replied.

“Your nuvela is miniscule compared to ours,” Nycra said, still caught up in their wealth. “I investigated your island for possible buyers and sellers, but found news of no underground movement with that kind of fortune. I only found one doing decently well, and he already bought swords.”

There was someone else on Berkha Tor buying swords? Keiyan would have to look into that later. But right now he needed to make this deal.

Telior jumped in first. “I know this may come as a surprise,” he said. “We’ve hidden our underground movement more than most. Rest assured we will fulfill our end of the bargain and give you half the beads up front. I’m a Shepherd of the Goddess and will readily swear the deal by Her name. But we need to smuggle these swords to our nuvela quickly. Will you agree to these terms?”

Nycra pursed his lips. “You’ll clean out my entire stock... But it’s a hard bargain to decline.” He nodded. “As sure as Elyon lives, I will make this deal.”

Keiyan shook his head. It would never cease to amaze him how much mentioning the names of deities would build trust between strangers. As if taking a vow by a name made the vow any more permanent.

But Telior merely grinned. “By Athia’s spark within me, we will fulfill our end of the bargain.”

Two hours later, Keiyan and Telior watched as their men quickly loaded the cloth-wrapped swords into the storage containers lined up in the open field. Long hoods covered their faces. If the nobles saw their faces, they would recognize them, and if they recognized them, they would ask questions. Exactly what they *didn't* need happening.

One of Yerelor's men raced by them to grab a bundle of four cloth-wrapped swords from Nycra's thugs, who were standing a couple wing-beats away from Keiyan and Telior. As soon as the man got the bundle, he hurried back to the containers and slid it into an empty container. Another man quickly fitted a false bottom over it and began packing it with Veilon's purchases. Keiyan smiled. Yerelor had trained his men well: they had it down to a science.

The sounds of bellowing filled the air. Urlla, large beasts of burden with wings and horns, were already ready for the packing to finish so the storage containers could be tied to their bellies and they could return to their own nuvela. One of the supervising nobles was yelling and whipping at them to stop their bellowing. Yerelor had fed them differently that morning to give them indigestion and distract the supervising nobles. The last thing they needed was for the nobles to realize what their workers were doing.

Thankfully, however, Veilon didn't grade the nobles for their efficiency in packing like he did their efficiency with their fields. Which meant the nobles had no incentives to watch what their workers were doing.

"And there's the last one," Keiyan murmured as one of Nycra's thugs handed the last bundle of swords over to their men.

"And with two minutes to go," Telior said. "I told you we'd have enough time."

"Barely."

"Let's wrap up the business deal with Nycra." Telior walked over to where Nycra was standing next to his thugs.

"It has been a pleasure doing business with you," Telior said as he handed over the bag with the last ten junipa beads. Yerelor had brought them the beads when he brought his urlla and workers over to the nuvela.

Nycra quickly opened the bag and scanned its contents before looking back up. "Indeed," he said. "I shall enjoy explaining to my customers why my entire stock of swords is depleted. But your payment is well worth this trade." He paused. "I do not ask my customers about their purchases, but I'm not naive." He looked down from the edge of Arceture toward the nuvela of Berkha Tor, which was drifting below them. "Rebellions are hard to execute well. May Elyon grant you success."

“Thank you,” Keiyan said. “May your coffers be full.”

“Oh, with these beads they will be,” Nycra said. His wings began to beat and he rose from the ground. “Stay safe.” And with that, he and his underlings flew back down into the city below them.

“You’re sure it was them that you saw?” Pelor, noble of Berkha Tor, stood in the inner chamber of his house speaking with his steward.

The steward nodded, a greedy look across his face. “It was definitely Veilon’s sons. They were right there, hanging off to the side while they did the trade.”

“Fascinating,” Pelor drummed his fingers against each other. “You have done well. The governor will be quite interested to hear this.”

Chapter Three

Ayiana soared over the Shackles. Below her, a disorganized collection of small buildings spread over the lowest plateau of Berkha Tor like a flock of birds scattering from a predator. Many nobles disdained the Shackles as a breeding-ground for vice and a home for the honor-less. But Ayiana paid little attention to their ridicules.

They would never understand what the Shacklers was truly like.

Ayiana looked left toward the nuvela that had passed over them earlier and was now receding into the distance. Her brothers wouldn't get back soon enough. They had been on the nuvela getting the weapons they needed to fight their father. And she couldn't wait to hear about it.

Twisting her body, Ayiana descended in a short spiral to her home. Not that she would brag about it, but her home was in a pretty ideal location. It was far from the lower cliffs dividing the Shackles from the farmlands where the lawless Shacklers thrived. But it was also far from the edges of the nuvela where lightning-storms with other nuvela occurred.

Pretty perfect all things considered.

Ayiana unfurled her tan wings behind her. Air caught against her wings, slowing her down. The house below her seemed to naturally spring up from the rest of the nuvela: a small turret of pale gray jutting out from a gray formless mass. After all, it was formed from the same substance that made up the rest of the nuvela. Like the other Shackler homes, it was small and lacked exterior beauty—a far cry from the multi-turreted and high-soaring homes of the nobles, or even the elegant shape of the house Telior and Keiyan lived in among the Freeholders. Worse, a fair portion of the house was underground, a fact nobles would use to rub in the Shacklers' faces. “Are you an *earthling*, that you live underground?”

But none of that mattered. Home consisted of more than possessions. Her father's palace, with all its soaring magnificence, would never steal the place this house had in her heart.

Ayiana dropped down and landed on the top of her house. The roof was only half-a-wing-beat across, but the rest of the house spread out like a pyramid beneath her. Kneeling down, she grabbed a hold of the handle on the wooden trapdoor fixed in the center of the roof and pulled it open. She dropped down the shaft, then pulled the door closed behind her.

The shaft went down three feet before opening into a large room that filled the whole upper portion of the house. Light flooded the room from dozens of little shafts set in the walls. A boiling pot and fireplace sat in one corner of the room, a small table for eating in another. In

another corner, next to Ediona's spinning wheel, a shaft opened down toward the underground portion of the house, where their sleeping quarters lay.

Ediona, her old nurse, turned from the carallel dough she was kneading to greet her. "Welcome home," she said, smiling. Her gray wings fluttered as she moved toward her. "How was your day?" Ediona, the only person Ayiana could really call a parent, was already nearing one hundred and fifty years. But between her piercing blue eyes, her sharp nose, and her still-full cheeks, she wasn't showing it yet.

"It was marvelous, Edi," Ayiana said as she flew around Ediona and then around the room. "I came up with a new story for the children: a story about a pair of sisters who have to thwart the schemes of a wizard in order to return home. The little ones loved it, and coming up with the story just made me feel so alive inside—you know?" She grinned as she looked back at Ediona.

A faint smile played across Ediona's lips. "I'm glad that you were able to use your imagination in service of others," she replied. "The Goddess would be pleased. I just returned from the fields twenty minutes ago and have hardly had time to prepare dinner. Could you help me with it?"

"Of course," Ayiana chirped, and quickly flew over to help. Taking some of the dough, she began to knead a smaller loaf while Ediona worked on the larger one.

"Have you heard anything from Tel and Key?" Ayiana asked.

"I haven't seen your brothers yet," Ediona replied. "But I would assume that they still plan on arriving for a late dinner tonight after they finish talking with their men."

"I really want to hear about their trip," Ayiana said, and her hands pressed into the soft carallel dough. "I would have loved to go with them and see what Arceture looked like! I could see it above us when I was outside with the children, and I think I made out some urla going back and forth, but it looked different from the other nuvelas I've visited—not that I've visited many—and because of how steep it was on the side, I wasn't able to see much..." Ayiana continued to chatter away as she and her nurse continued to make the bread.

An hour later, just as they were moving the now-baked bread out of the fireplace, there was a tell-tale thump of feet on the roof above. A moment later, there was a whoosh of wind as the door opened and the intruders flew into the house.

“They’re here!” Ayiana said, nearly dropping the bread as she put it down on the table. She flew up to greet Keiyan and Telior as they entered the room. Ayiana and her brothers flew around each other for a moment—the standard fylen greeting for close friends and family members—and then Ayiana couldn’t control her questions any longer.

“How did your mission go? Were you able to get many swords? What did the nuvela look like? How big was it? Did the inhabitants of the nuvela have any interesting habits? Did anyone catch you in your plan?”

Ayiana suddenly paused as she noticed their startled faces.

“Sorry, getting ahead of myself again,” Ayiana said. She could feel herself blushing. “I just wanted to know what happened.”

“I’m sure Keiyan could tell you a very compelling tale about everything we did,” Telior replied, “complete with a long explanation of how all the minor details of the plan worked out.”

“I’m positive she doesn’t want *that*,” Keiyan replied, elbowing Telior playfully. “Not that the minor details *didn’t* work out exactly as planned, but...”

“We should sit down and eat first,” Telior said. “Is dinner ready, Ediona, or can we help prepare it?”

“We just finished making it when you two dropped in,” Ediona replied smiling. And with that, the four fylen sat down at the table, blessed the Goddess, and began to eat the bread Ediona and Ayiana had made. Ayiana couldn’t help looking at her brothers as she ate. In many ways, both of them looked fairly similar: from their family’s tan complexion to their green eyes, small ears, lean builds, and sharp, well-defined chins. The brothers were often mistaken for each other. But Ayiana couldn’t help but notice the differences: Telior’s softer hands from reading and studying and Keiyan’s rougher hands from helping the Shacklers in the fields; Telior’s carefully presented and groomed look and Keiyan’s haphazard, almost sloppy appearance.

“Mm, this is fantastic bread by the way,” Keiyan said. “Thank you. Now, about our mission today-”

Ayiana leaned forward. “Please elaborate.”

“Why else would I be bringing it up?” Keiyan grinned. “At the crack of dawn, both of us were up and setting off on our separate missions. I got details about Arceture from Srial, and Telior had the interesting mission.”

Ayiana turned toward Telior. “You infiltrated the palace, right?”

Telior nodded. “Keiyan was busy arranging the minor details of the mission, so I grabbed the beads. It was pretty simple. Sneaking in took a while because of how many people were running around for the trade, but everything else went according to plan. The guards of the vault let me in, the junipa beads were easy to find, and I got out fast.”

“Did you see father when you were there?” Ayiana asked.

Telior shook his head quickly and his face hardened. “Veilon was in a different part of the palace. I didn’t have to lay eyes on him treating his servants like trash. I did catch a glimpse of him later when we returned from Arceture, but I didn’t see him in the palace.”

“Oh, okay,” Ayiana said, slightly disappointed Telior had no new descriptions or stories about their father. But she tried not to let the disappointment show. “So you had the junipa beads,” Ayiana said. “Then what?”

“Then,” Keiyan said, cutting himself a slice of bread before leaning back. “Then we went to Arceture.”

And with that, Keiyan began going through a detailed explanation of Arceture, answering all of Ayiana’s questions about the geography of the place, their dealings with Nycra, and how they got their swords off of the nuvela without being noticed. Ayiana noticed Telior trying to suppress a yawn—Telior tended not to care for the details. But Ayiana did. And she kept her attention on Keiyan as he finished explaining how they got the swords on the urla.

“...We got off Arceture about an hour past noon,” Keiyan said. “We needed to wait until Veilon and the nobles had taken out Veilon’s supplies to get the swords, but once they were gone, it was a simple task. Telior gave a marvelous speech to the men as well once we brought the swords to our hideout. Explained everything we had done, laid down our plans, and moved them to action. One of the best speeches I’ve seen him give.”

“You helped me with preparing it, so it wasn’t *all* my doing,” Telior said.

“Perhaps—but the delivery helped a lot.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Then Ediona spoke. “You have a month to pull this together and wage the revolution?”

Keiyan nodded.

“How are you going to build an army in a month?”

“We already have the hundred men we’ve trained with wooden swords,” Keiyan said. “Then Telior will give a bunch of speeches to mentally prepare the crowds for revolution. If we can get the Shacklers to rise up as a mob, between them and our swordsmen, it will all be over.”

Ayiana pushed her empty plate away from her. “What if father hears about your speeches?” Ayiana asked.

“That’s the thing,” Telior said, grinning. “Veilon’s already heard about our speeches. A lot. And he’s already written us off as children who are pure talk-without-action. He will ignore us until the day we call the Shacklers to action and they follow. Then it will be too late.”

“Sounds like you have the whole plan together,” Ediona said. Ayiana agreed, and her heartbeat quickened. They had a plan, and a good one at that. They were actually doing this!

Keiyan nodded. “There’s just one thing left to resolve: dealing with Veilon’s airmancer.”

Ayiana cocked her head. “Can’t you just overrun Zariel with the mob of Shacklers?”

Keiyan shook his head. “He could set up a wind barrier. With the winds behind him, he could keep our entire army from getting to the palace.”

“We can handle that, though,” Telior said. “I’ll talk with the other Shepherds, and we’ll pray for a miracle to silence Zariel. The Goddess will assist us and destroy his wind barrier.”

Keiyan tapped his fingers against the table. “We can’t rely on that.”

Telior pursed his lips. “Because you don’t believe in the Goddess.”

So this was coming up again. Ayiana had been happy not to hear any arguments about the Goddess for a while.

Keiyan shook his head. “Even if Athia was real, isn’t one of her chief tenets her unpredictability?”

“She’s *free*. Not unpredictable.”

“Either way, she can never be pinned down or expected to do anything. We can’t leave the salvation of Berkha Tor up to chance.”

“We won’t be leaving it up to chance, Keiyan. Did you have another solution?”

“I want our own aïromancer.”

Silence dropped over the table. Ayiana waited to see how long it would take Telior to react.

Finally, Telior spoke. “We’re not going to rely on artificial miracles like aïromancy.”

“So we’ll lose and let Veilon continue his wicked reign?” Keiyan asked. “I know what you Shepherds say about the unnaturalness of aïromancy, but it’s the way the world works.” Ayiana rubbed the back of her neck. This wouldn’t turn out well.

“I’m not going to play rhetoric games on what aïromancy is,” Telior said. “The point is it’s forbidden. Just because you don’t believe in the gods doesn’t mean the rest of us will disobey them.”

Ediona nodded. “I understand where you’re coming from Keiyan, but you can’t do this.”

“Does it really matter, though?” Ayiana blurted out. Her brothers turned toward her, and her cheeks reddened. She didn’t normally get involved in these heated disputes. But it was too late to take back her words. “Wouldn’t Athia understand if we broke some rules to bring about Her justice and equality to the nuvela.” Keiyan flashed her a smile.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Telior said. “We can’t use the wickedness of the nobles against them and pretend we’re still on the right side.”

Ayiana wasn’t quite sure that argument worked.

Keiyan laughed, clearly agreeing with her. “What are you saying, Telior? Of course we’d be on the right side. We’re not Veilon.”

“Start compromising our ideals and we will be soon enough.”

“So instead you want Zariel to slaughter us?”

“Keiyan, I know you don’t believe in her, but the Goddess *will* protect your army,” Ediona said. “She may be free, but she rewards those who seek her.”

Ayiana frowned. She certainly believed in the Goddess. But she could also see Keiyan’s point. The Goddess *was* pretty unpredictable. Was it really bad to break a couple rules for a greater good?

“Fine,” Keiyan said. “If you insist, I suppose there’s nothing else I can do about that.” Ever since Keiyan stopped believing in the gods, they had regularly debated him on religious points. But there hadn’t been stakes like this attached to those beliefs before. Keiyan looked none too happy about this turn of events.

Later that night, Keiyan found himself flying toward a particular house in the Shackles. Telior had already returned to their house in the Freeholders’ district. Keiyan would join him eventually. But he needed to do something first. He landed on the roof of the house he was looking for and pounded the door twice with his foot. It was late, but he was pretty sure she would still be awake at this hour.

After a couple moments, the door opened up, and a woman’s head poked out. She wore her trademark red scarf, even though the weather didn’t call for it. She raised an eyebrow. “Keiyan? It’s rather late.”

“I know, Srial,” Keiyan said. “Can we talk?”

Srial shrugged. “You never were one to beat around the issue...” She shrugged. “Come in.” She flew back into the house.

Keiyan followed. Two gerna branches lit the room. The house was similar to Ediona’s—a large upper room with a fireplace in one end and a seating area in the other. There wasn’t much difference between Shackler houses after all. Keiyan’s heart beat quickly as he considered what he was going to ask.

“So,” Srial said, sitting down on one of the chairs. Her face glowed softly under the light of the gerna branches. “What do you want? Your rebellion getting anywhere?”

“It actually is...” Keiyan said, sitting down. For one moment he wavered on his question. But he was too far in now. “I need an airomancer who will work with us.”

Keiyan knew what he was asking—and more than that, what he was doing. If Telior or Ediona learned about this, things would turn sour fast.

But further discussion wouldn’t change anything. He’d tried that in the past.

He didn’t have any other options.

Srial pursed her lips. “The ban means the only people who can normally afford to be an airomancer in secret are nobles. I’m guessing you’re not looking for a noble.”

“I was hoping you’d know of someone else: a Freeholder or something.”

“That’s difficult. Pelor normally uses me to spy on other nobles, not on Freeholders... Some gangs under the cliffs have airmancers, though.”

Keiyan raised an eyebrow. “Good ones?”

Srial shrugged and kicked up one of her legs. “Depends on the gang... Lung’s gang has a decent one.”

“Lung’s real?” Keiyan shook his head. “It’s not relevant anyways. Those under the cliffs don’t exactly have trustworthy character.”

“Freeholders do?”

“They know how to work for their own interests.”

Srial sighed. “Well, I may know of one person.”

Keiyan leaned forward in his seat. His feet tapped the ground. So there was a chance. “Who?”

“A while back, Pelor had me spying on Prouenor, one of the more proficient airmancers among the nobles, back when Prouenor was rising through the nobles’ ranks. He had a strange business set-up with a Freeholder litigant named Arle.”

The name rung a bell. “I think I’ve heard of him,” Keiyan said.

“You should have,” Srial said as she played with the end of her scarf. “His father was a master in court cases and taught him everything he knew. When his father died, Arle set up his own business immediately, even though he had just come of age. He’s easily one of the best litigants in the business, despite his youth, and many people suspect he’s trying to marry into the ranks of the nobles.

“As a litigant, he works for Prouenor a lot. Pelor wanted me to investigate their relationship more, as Prouenor wasn’t supposed to have enough money to hire Arle for all the things Arle did. To make a long story short, all I discovered was that Prouenor and Arle would meet weekly for two hours in Prouenor’s mansion in the middle of the night. Everything they did was in a locked ballroom, so I couldn’t figure it out. Pelor, however, suspected that Prouenor was teaching Arle airmancy in exchange for court work.”

Pieces began clicking in Keiyan's brain. "I think I remember this Freeholder. He's known for the way he acts around women, right?"

Srial nodded. "His reputation as a flirt and womanizer is as widespread as his reputation as a litigant. I don't know for sure he's an aïromancer, but for someone who wants to impress women, aïromancy is a handy skill to have. I have no idea if he'd be interested in joining you, but he's the only Freeholder I know who might know aïromancy."

One option was better than none. "That's helpful," Keiyan said, standing up. "I'll check him out."

Srial leaned back in her seat. "You know, I'm more than a little surprised you two are pursuing this path. Isn't Telior a Shepherd?"

Keiyan pursed his lips. "Telior doesn't know."

Srial raised an eyebrow, looking for a response. But how was he supposed to respond? He *could* explain how much of a stickler Telior was to his ideals and how his plan would only end with their whole army being slaughtered. But that would require defaming his brother in front of Srial.

"It's complicated," Keiyan finally said. "Just don't mention this conversation if you run into him."

It was hard to read Srial's face in the dim light of the gerna branches. "If you say so," Srial said. "I hope you know what you're doing. I've taken too many risks gathering information from the nobles for you just to watch the revolution fail. If Telior finds out..."

"I know the risks," Keiyan said.

Telior *would* discover Keiyan's deceit on the day of the assault if Keiyan successfully got Arle on their side. Learning about it would undoubtedly cause rifts.

But it was the only way to kill Veilon.