

Prologue

Keiyan fell.

Terror loosened his limbs. His arms and his wings strained against the bonds, but the rough, sturdy cords held firm. Breath burst from his mouth as wind thundered past his spinning body. What had his father done? Thousands of feet of air still stood between him and the ground, but he fell faster by the second. Adrenaline rushed through his body to no avail. In a couple minutes, the ground would rip his body into pieces.

He was going to die.

A howl of anguish ripped past his lips. How could this have happened? He thrashed against the cords. But the guards had known how to tie their knots. A deep tremor ran down his body like the fire that bends and eats a twig thrown into the flames. He squirmed. He wasn't meant to die now. He was supposed to liberate his people.

His body twisted in his plummet, and he lost sight of the ground, instead staring up toward the nuvela above. The darkened land mass loomed over him as it moved across the sky, silhouetted by the light of the moon. Keiyan's eyes burned. 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.

He strained his arms and wings against the cords. They bit deeper into his flesh. Sweat soaked through his tunic. He tried to keep himself from involuntarily thrashing. Why wasn't he strong enough to do this? He couldn't free himself.

What chance did he have at survival now?

Wind whistled past him and turned his body this way and that. Now he was falling headfirst. Tears threatened to spring to Keiyan's eyes, but he choked them back. His breath came out heavy. Why couldn't he have been more careful? He had carefully evaded Veilon's attention for years—until he made *that* choice. Memories of all his mistakes these last three days flooded his mind. Actions he should never have taken. Words he longed to take back. Relationships he had strained far too much.

He had ruined things, hadn't he?

A low-floating unstable nuvela passed by about a hundred wingspans away. His throat tightened. That was the last of the airborne landmasses. Now nothing but open air stood beneath him and the ground. The world spun. He wanted to retch.

He wondered who would remember him when his body was plastered against the earth.

He hadn't spent years planning a revolution just to die a humiliating death like this. He was supposed to herald in a better world for Berkha Tor. Without him, what would happen to their revolution? What would happen to his brother and sister? How would they remember him after what he'd done to them?

His breath came out in spurts. He had to do *something*.

Unfortunately, he had less than a minute to think up a plan before the ground broke every bone in his body.

Part One: The Ethereal Sky

Chapter One

Weeks Earlier

Every day, the tears of the abused cry out for justice.

One man can only help so many.

Keiyan flew over the fields of carallel toward the sounds of commotion fifty yards away. His gut clenched. No matter how many times he'd heard this before, he still never got used to the sounds of suffering. His brown leathery wings beat hard against the afternoon wind.

Four Enforcers had already pinned a young man's body and wings against the grey soil of the airborne island and drawn out their weapons by the time Keiyan arrived at the scene. He folded his wings and landed, legs buckling on impact. He moved toward them, thin calf-high stalks of creamy-blossomed carallel smacking against his legs. A couple yards away from the pinned boy, two other Enforcers held back a struggling young woman. Keiyan didn't know what all had happened, but he did know one thing: in the fields of Berkha Tor, fair treatment didn't happen by itself.

"Hold!" Keiyan barked before the Enforcers could use their swords. "Weapons down." He passed the Drop on his left—a hole the size of the palace that went right through the center of their airborne island revealing the ground thousands of feet underneath. If only he could clip their wings and throw one of them down it...

The Enforcers looked up, wings flaring. The lead Enforcer's pockmarked face went sour; he looked about Keiyan's age: he would have only recently reached the age of adulthood. "This is none of your business, son of Veilon. It's just a field laborer. Go your way."

“No!” the young man gasped. He shook his head to get his long, blond hair out of his glistening blue eyes. “Enforcer Obion’s trying to take her!”

The Enforcers wedged his face into the ground before he could get anything else out.

Keiyan crossed his arms and stood taller, trying to use his height to his advantage. “I didn’t ask your opinion,” he said to Obion. “I gave an order as your superior.”

“Sorry,” Obion said. Youthful obstinacy gleamed in his eyes. “You can pull that drivel on other Enforcers all you want, but I don’t care one bit for who your father is. When you and your arktane brother preach revolt against him, you lose your claims of authority. Go back to giving water to the workers or whatever your current form of charity is right now.”

One of the three Enforcers behind him flew off—probably to get backup. But the other two fidgeted at this statement. Clearly Obion didn’t speak for them all. Best to capitalize on that. Keiyan gestured toward them. “Get the boy up off the ground.”

“No!” Obion snapped, turning back to the others. “We all know Keiyan does not speak for the governor. You work for Lord Pelor, and just because this man’s the son of the governor does not mean we have to-”

The two Enforcers pulled the blond boy up. They obviously understood who was in charge.

“Pelor’s trying to rape my sister,” the boy gasped as soon as he was off the ground. “You need to-”

Obion hit him in the mouth. “Were you given permission to speak?”

“Hit him again, and you’ll regret it,” Keiyan snapped. How dare these men. He put a hand to his sword. If words alone wouldn’t beat submission into this Enforcer, something else would. “I don’t care what flea-ridden noble you’re the son of.” *Probably Pelor.* Keiyan glanced at the raven-haired girl held by the other two Enforcers. She didn’t look much older than the boy, but he could see the X-shaped identity mark of Berkha Tor clearly visible on her upper forearm, so she must have recently gone through the rites of initiation. Tears stained her face. Of course they did. Everyone knew Pelor’s reputation. He tensed for battle.

“There’s five of us and one of you,” Obion said. “We’re following Pelor’s orders.” He snapped at the men holding the girl. “Take her off.”

Villains. If a fight was what these men, Keiyan was ready to give it to them. He dug his feet into the ground, ready to pounce.

“No!” The boy struggled violently against his captors as they unfurled their wings.

“I said-” Obion wheeled around back at him.

Enough was enough. Keiyan lunged forward. Before Obion could hit the boy again, Keiyan grabbed the Enforcer’s arm and jerked him back, throwing him to the ground. Time someone gave this arrogant youth a taste of his own medicine. Obion’s wings flared and he immediately flew up, fists shooting toward him. Keiyan socked him in the jaw. The Enforcer pummeled his chest. Keiyan stepped back. As Obion dove into him, Keiyan grabbed the man’s hands to grapple him and used his momentum against him to drive him back down into the ground. Wings smacked against the ground. Thankfully, the other Enforcers weren’t doing anything. For a moment, the two of them grappled on the ground for control, conscious of the

Drop several yards away from them. He needed to act fast if he was going to establish domination in time to save-

Then a familiar voice rang out. “What is going on here?”

No. Warmth rose to Keiyan’s cheeks. Veilon? Here? His heart caught. He slowly stood up, releasing his hold on Obion, and turned to meet the gaze of his father, Veilon.

His father hovered ten feet away from him, his thin wings overshadowing his lean form. His cold brown eyes stared back at Keiyan. “I didn’t expect to be dealing with this today.” Zariel, his father’s airomancer, hovered next to him wielding his blackened mage staff.

A dozen potential comebacks sprang to Keiyan’s lips, but he had to be tactful. His father may be inept enough to turn a blind eye to what he and his brother said behind his back, but there were limits about what was safe to say in front of the sovereign governor of their island. Especially when he was backed by his mage. Sweat beaded on his forehead. As much as he tried to use his father’s name to get what he needed, he knew Veilon would never back him up. His bluster about his own authority was simply that. Which meant both the boy and the girl were in dire danger.

“Pelor sent these Enforcers to bring a girl back to him so he could violate her,” Keiyan said. *Act the diplomat.* “I thought your workers deserved the protection of the law.”

“Lies,” Obion spat, standing up. “This Shackler-” He gestured to the boy here. “-defames my father’s name. The girl is Shackled to my father as a serf and my father needs more household servants from the fields. He sent us to collect her, but then this boy tried to attack us. We’d just taken him down when your son arrived and attacked *me* because of this boy’s lies.”

“Please,” the blond boy begged, wide eyes gazing at Veilon. “That’s not true. This is how he always treats the girls working in his house.”

Keiyan bit his lip. Appealing to his father’s sense of mercy was futile. He knew that. But what else could he say? “You know Pelor’s reputation.”

The sun gleamed off Veilon’s bald head as he gazed upon Keiyan. “I know *rumors*. But a governor doesn’t deal with rumors. He deals with facts.” He landed on the ground and walked toward them. “And what I’m hearing is that not only is a serf resisting one of my Enforcers, but he actually dared to strike them.”

Keiyan knew the battle was lost, but he had to try. What kind of a person would he be if he let this happen? “Veilon.” Keiyan stepped in between the boy and his father, heart beating. “You want evidence? I can bring you a dozen women within a day who will testify as to what kind of a person Pelor is. Name a time and place and I’ll give you the facts.”

“Please. Don’t embarrass yourself, son. It will only make it clear how little power you have.” He looked over toward the Enforcers holding the girl. “You’re free to take her.”

No. The girl wailed. The Enforcers immediately took off with her. *How could he?* The boy threw himself forward, struggling against the Enforcers who kept him in an iron grip. Keiyan balled his fists. “You-”

“Enough.” Veilon snapped his fingers and Zariel flew down next to him, his staff glowing. “Think before you act, son.”

Diplomacy hadn't gotten him anything, so now all was let loose. "Like you're giving any real thought to this situation? You know exactly what Pelor is going to do to her if you let them do this."

"Yes. He'll have a house servant doing work for him, just like he said. Now as for you." His eyes now turned to the boy. "You dared lift your hand against my Enforcers?"

The girl wasn't enough? Keiyan instinctively put a hand to one of his swords and steadied his stance.

"You—you monster!" the boy yelled through tears. "We've done nothing to you or to Pelor! If you knew how many days I've broken my back out here for you in the fields—"

"Muzzle him." Veilon said. The Enforcers immediately complied. "And Keiyan, get a hand off that sword if you don't want to Zariel to fry you into a crisp with his lightning."

"He was defending his sister," Keiyan snarled. "Look at his right arm—he hasn't even gone through the rites of initiation into adulthood yet!"

"But he attacked an Enforcer: an act forbidden by law regardless of age." He gestured to the Enforcers. "Hold out the hand that struck you." One of the Enforcers pinned him to the ground while the other held up his right arm. The boy screamed into the ground.

"And would you expect a man to do anything differently when a man intends to rape his own sister?" Keiyan snarled. Both hands now clenched both his swords. If Zariel wasn't there, he swore he would-

“Without the enforcement of the law, we have no order.” Veilon nodded to Obion. “Draw out your sword and take off the right arm at the elbow. Make him an example to anyone else who would resist your enforcement. And Zariel—move my fool son away before he hurts someone.”

Zariel’s staff glowed. A blast of air suddenly slammed into Keiyan and threw him twenty feet back through stalks of carallel.

Two seconds later, a heart-rending howl bled throughout the fields.

For a moment, Keiyan did nothing. He just lay there, panting. His breath was coming in heavy; his chest heaved, and it wasn’t from the fall. If... if he had only been able to tell those Enforcers off thirty seconds earlier...

Keiyan shoved himself onto his side and stared numbly at the ashen ground. He knew he couldn’t save everyone.

But it didn’t make it hurt any less every time he failed.

A shadow fell over him, and Keiyan stared up toward the figure above him silhouetted between him and the sun.

“You should know better by now,” the all-too familiar voice said. “Most fathers wouldn’t put up with such childishness from their children.”

“Yeah.” He hated this inevitable talk. “You *would* know what most fathers are like, wouldn’t you?”

“If I wanted to, I could have Zariel dispose of you.”

“Great fatherly thing to say.” He pushed himself up into a kneeling position. “Is that what you said to Lerina all those years ago?”

His father moved slightly at that. “Don’t you dare mention that name.”

A rare admission of emotion from his father. So he still had something he could hit him with. “Sorry. I thought most fathers liked hearing the names of their firstborn daughter.”

“I don’t have to deal with you. Oppose me in public again and I’ll throw both you and your brother in prison. It’ll be long overdue.” His black silhouette spun and he began to fly back toward the palace.

For once, an immediate comeback evaded him. He stared blankly as his father flew off, watching his form shrink and blur against the sky. He should have known his pleas for the boy would be in vain. When a father is willing to sell off one of his own daughters, why would he have mercy on the sister of one of his workers?

Keiyan slammed his fist against the ground. He wanted tears to flow. They should. Not for him, but for a girl about to be ravaged and a boy now maimed for doing the right thing. How many else would mourn for their loss? “That’s just the way Berkha Tor is.” He’d heard it time and time again: the abused surrendering in the face of futility. He’d sworn that this would never be him.

But every additional day it took for them to raise their coming revolution, more lives were ruined.

And one man alone couldn’t stop it.

Chapter Two

Telior could feel Veria's eyes on him the moment he sat down in the midst of the assembly. His heart beat raced and he felt an invisible pressure on his chest. She knew exactly what he had done.

And her narrowing hazel eyes framed by her bleached hair spoke volumes about her thoughts.

Around him, a hundred or so worshipers of the Goddess crowded around the living area of the small house and prayed silently. He had just encouraged them to pray for justice for the girl Pelor had seized in the fields that day, and to resist those like Pelor who abused their power. Veria was going to have his head for that when their service was over. She had warned him against saying anything even remotely revolutionary during these assemblies.

But if he didn't encourage the people to stand up for the weak, who would?

Telior closed his eyes and tried to ignore the weight of Veria's gaze. Fear knotted in his stomach. As much as he tried to give off the image of a steadfast man who would stand up for the oppressed no matter what, standing firm came with a cost. Veria was a Shepherd—one tasked by the Goddess to lead her people into truth. For years, Telior had been working to graduate from apprenticeship to the role of a full Shepherd so he could use that religious authority to unite the Shacklers to stand up against Veilon. Soon, their council would be voting on his acceptance into their ranks.

His legs tingled. He couldn't keep them still. Church doctrine forbid formal hierarchy among the Shepherds. But one would be a fool not to acknowledge the unwritten position of influence Veria held among the Shepherds. Half of them followed her lead. If she wanted, she

could easily sabotage his plans to become a Shepherd. A pit grew in his stomach. He knew he had done the right thing by speaking up for the girl.

But in the Shackles, you weren't always rewarded for doing the right thing.

The worship service ended sooner than Telior expected. The fellow worshipers began to stand up and stretch their wings to leave. Veria immediately began marching his way.

Telior wasn't ready for this conversation.

"Telior," Veria said as the worshipers began to leave. "Would you mind if I spoke with you for a moment?"

"Okay." Telior stood up and glanced around the round cone-shaped room and upward toward the Shacklers flying out through the door in the roof. Unlike his brother Keiyan, he hated confrontations. He avoided eye contact with Veria and began to mentally review the plans he'd made previously for their inevitable clash.

The last worshiper left the home. Veria looked him up and down carefully as her tan wings slowly rose and fell behind her. If she had any pity, her eyes failed to show it. "That advice you gave the rest of the worshipers tonight," she said. "It almost seemed like an agenda."

"Did it?" His voice came out weaker than he would have liked. He dug his fingernails into his palm. He needed to avoid answering her question directly.

"It did." Her words dropped with precision. No emotion leaked through her gaze. "I'm concerned about your training. While the priests of Aeor lecture and give the nobles sermons, as Shepherds of Athia, we're called to be different and guide people to recognize the voice of the Goddess in *themselves*. Have you not been taught that?"

His mouth felt dry. She was being rather direct. He forced himself to smile. “With all due respect, Veria, was that not what I did tonight?”

Her lips became a straight line. “Tonight?” She had a school teacher’s judgment in her voice. “You spent all your time talking about that girl Pelor took in the fields and why the Goddess wants to put a swift end to the ruling class of our nuvela. That sounds more like preaching than guiding.”

So she wasn’t backing down. Any other day, Telior would be furious at her claims. Shacklers like her who defended their oppressors were the exact reason why injustices continued. But right now, he just needed to figure out how to get through this without making an enemy who would oppose his dreams of becoming a Shepherd.

Telior cleared his throat. “The Goddess put that girl on my heart today and whispered those words to me. I thought I was supposed to share with others what I’ve learned from her.” Butterflies flipped in his stomach.

Veria’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you misunderstand what we do as Shepherds. We do not make the voice we personally hear from the Goddess binding on others.” She paused, eying him carefully. “You’ll need to address this with the worshipers next week. After all-” She paused again. “-we can’t have them thinking you spoke on behalf of the Shepherds, can we?”

Her words hit Telior like a wave of ice. Was she seriously going to try to make him *apologize* to the people for what he had said? He hadn’t prepared for that kind of response.

“Excuse me?” He wanted to wilt under her gaze.

“You heard me. You said something you shouldn’t have. As your mentor, I’m asking you to apologize to them next week for inappropriately preaching.”

Telior’s throat tightened. “*Play it safe.*” The voice of Keiyan rang in his ears. It was a precarious situation. During his two years as an apprentice, he had already made things bad enough by creating a schism among the Shepherds in a religion that, by its doctrine, wasn’t *supposed* to be able to create schisms. Roughly half the Shepherds now agreed with his belief that they had a duty to bring about a just society. But the other half, led by his mentor Veria, still believed that they should only align themselves *personally* with just principles. That made things tense between the two of them.

Now, he had a decision to make. Apologize to the Shacklers next week or stand firm to his beliefs. Keiyan would urge him to lie and do whatever it took to become a Shackler.

But that wasn’t who he was. Nor did the Goddess reward such behavior.

He looked up at her contemptuous stare. “I’m sorry we don’t see eye-to-eye on everything. I just thought that the Goddess cared for the weak and that encouraging others to recognize this voice in themselves was important. Maybe you don’t feel like the weak are important, but I do.”

Her eyes flashed. “Don’t put words into my mouth, son of Veilon.” That name hurt. “We both know that wasn’t what I said. Now will you heed my command or no?”

He wanted to acquiesce. But he had seen the cost of cowardice. And he had sworn never to take that path again.

Telior took a deep breath and straightened his back. “I understand that we come from two different points of view. But I became a Shepherd to guide the Shacklers into the truth that’s found only in Her. We aren’t like earthlings who crawl on legs on the planet beneath: we are fylen—those gifted with wings to soar through the skies and live free like the Goddess. When I understand that truth, I can’t do otherwise.”

It was like a wind rushed through him. He had spoken the truth, he had said what he really believed, and he felt *free*. The truth did that to you. But the expression on her face hardened. And Telior was suddenly aware of how silent the small room was. Wind whistled in the distance; all else was silent.

“You know,” she finally said, “there were quite a few on the council who spoke against letting the son of the governor into our ranks. They feared he would want to rule us. I had hoped that by becoming your mentor, I would be able to steer you away from such pursuits. Apparently I was wrong.”

He looked away. The initial euphoria of standing up to her was gone, replaced by his recognition of failure. “I have no interest in ruling over you.”

“No. Just to overthrow our customs and beliefs in your single-tracked plan to kill your father. Have you even thought about those of us who will have to pick up the pieces when you fail? Or what would happen to the worship of the Goddess? The only reason your father allows us to exist as an alternative to the state religion is because he doesn’t view us as a threat. If we supported a failed revolution, he’d force the people to worship Aeor again.”

“We won’t fail.” Not after how much work he’d put into their plans.

Veria shook her head. “And it’s precisely that self-confidence that will doom you. Some of us don’t have the privilege of pulling the daddy card whenever they get into trouble. I know you hate how you think I enable your father and the nobles. But I’ve seen who suffers when revolutions fail. So don’t blame me when I don’t entertain the Shacklers with false hopes.” She paused. “I’m done mentoring you. The only thing I’m doing is enabling you at this point and I swore I would never let that happen.”

She gestured toward the door. “When you leave tonight, make sure you don’t leave anything behind. You won’t need to come back for any future meetings.”

So. He had failed. What else was new?

Telior sat on the lower cliffs overlooking the darkened Shackles ahead of him. The moon shone dimly that night, and the night wind was all too soft, leaving him only with his own failure to think about. He did have half the Shepherds behind him—it wasn’t impossible for him to still enter their ranks.

But it would be a lot harder now with Veria’s active opposition. All because he couldn’t keep quiet about injustice.

He rubbed his forehead. The weight of the responsibilities felt quite tangible at the moment. Keiyan was counting on his help tomorrow in purchasing swords from the passing nuvela. It would help their revolution in the short-term. But a lot of their long-term plans would be in jeopardy if Veria succeeded in evicting him from the ranks of the Shepherds.

He needed a new plan.

Preferably one before Keiyan learned what he had done.

He did have a number of allies among the Shepherds who agreed with him about the need to stand up to Veilon. Not everyone was as afraid of Veilon banning the worship of the Goddess as Veria was. Or perhaps they were just willing to risk the state worship of Aeor becoming dominant again in order to do what was right. He could try and get some of them to convince the Shepherds undecided about the growing schism in their ranks. They hadn't burned the bridges that Telior had yet.

It may or may not work. But it was the obvious course for him to take. He exhaled slowly. He could do this. Permanent schism with Veria had been inevitable after all. It just came faster than he had expected. But he could handle this.

All he needed was a new way to convince the Shepherds to stand up to the governor now that one of the oldest Shepherds was shunning him. Another practice that by doctrine wasn't supposed to happen among the worshipers of the Goddess.

Maybe this *would* be harder than he expected.

Telior hung his head. It had been nearly fourteen years since that fateful day when Veilon had sold off their older sister to keep his governorship. Fourteen years since they'd vowed to end his murderous tyranny once and for all. All he wanted to do was to bring the people of Berkha Tor the salvation that they longed for.

Unfortunately, his refusal to back down in their quest for justice hurt his mission as much as it helped him.

Chapter Three

The high cliffs of the incoming island plowed through the skies ahead, moved by the relentless Nuvelan Currents. Its name was Arceture. Keiyan gazed steadily up toward it from his position at the edge of the fields of Berkha Tor. Its weapons market would liberate the people of Berkha Tor against their oppressors.

Telior landed next to him. Keiyan turned toward him. “Do you have the money?”

Telior nodded. “Aye.”

“Let’s go.” Keiyan flapped his wings and flew up over the fields of Berkha Tor and toward the incoming island. Telior followed. Arceture loomed large beyond the fields. It wouldn’t pass directly above Berkha Tor, but it would come close when it drifted past.

Movement from the right caught Keiyan’s eyes. Above the upper cliffs, a forest of pale oof trees covered most of the upper plateau of Berkha Tor with their long teal leaves. Their father’s palace peaked up through the trees. And coming down from the upper plateau flew a sizable group of men descending to the wharfs. His father was sending out his cohort to transport the items he and the opposing governor had agreed to trade. It wasn’t every day that the unpredictable courses of the Nuvelan Currents brought them near another inhabited nuvela.

“Srial finally got her report to me late last night,” Telior said as they spanned the distance between the two nuvelas. “Apparently thirty thousand or so fylen make their home on Arceture.”

“That’s about double our size,” Keiyan said, glancing back. “Enough to attack us and seize what they want if they so desired. They must have forced Veilon into giving them some good prices.” While they tended to pass one of the thousands of inhabited nuvelas every six weeks or so, it could be decades before they passed by Arceture again in the nuvela’s

meandering course throughout the heavens. For many governors, that was incentive enough to seize what you could if you had the power to do so. The practice had lessened over the past several hundred years due to better guerilla tactics, but it still posed real danger to smaller nuvelas.

“He’ll get what’s coming to him,” Telior said. “I’m just happy to cross paths with a nuvela boasting a large market.”

“We’ll christen every sword we purchase with a noble’s blood.”

They soared over the edge of Arceture to overlook the nuvela spreading out beneath them. A long collection of buildings cut a swathe down the center of the downward-sloping, crescent-shaped island. Fields spread out from either side of the swathe. Close-to-perfect symmetry and form. Even Keiyan could recognize the elegance—and efficiency—of a nuvela beautifully sculpted like this. An airomancer must have been heavily involved in its formation.

“The market is at the bottom of the housing district,” Telior said. Keiyan nodded. And then they swooped down into the city. Buildings rushed by on either side of them. Keiyan tried to keep himself from staring. He needed to stay on task. But the towering houses had *straight* edges and almost-rectangular shapes as opposed to the curved, cone-shaped houses of Berkha Tor. Xylen—the pale grey substance that made up the nuvelas—didn’t naturally mold into straight shapes; the sight was jarring. He had never seen anything like that before.

Weaving between the rectangular towers, they began to maneuver toward the bottom of the nuvela. Keiyan couldn’t see many fylen around; most were likely working in the fields. The nuvela was divided into several ledges that split the different sections of the population center

into terraces. The further down they descended, the smaller the houses became and the less precise in their rectangular shapes.

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

“Someday, Berkha Tor will be different,” Keiyan said. “The ex-nobles will live with the Shacklers and the Shacklers with the nobles once we cleanse the throne room of Veilon’s blood.”

“I just can’t believe so many nuvelas do this,” Telior said. Then he laughed. “I suppose, though, that it’s just Drecht’s Theory of Separation in practice. We enforce our internal prejudices on reality in order to reinforce those prejudices.”

What? Keiyan’s mouth dropped. “We’re heading toward an arms dealer, and you’re thinking philosophy?”

“It doesn’t slow me down.”

“Only you would think about philosophy right now.” The buildings around them were more like huts now—the same types they had in the poorest regions of the Shackles. Even the huts had somewhat straight edges! It made little sense, though the strange designs *did* possess a certain allure to them. Between the straight corners and equidistant buildings, the layout was the most ordered of any Keiyan had seen on foreign nuvelas. Then, the last of the rectangular huts passed by and they emerged into a cacophonous open market.

The smells hit Keiyan first: smoked, spicy, and pungent. Then the sights. Dozens of large tents and canopied stalls had been crammed into a narrow space between the last houses and the edge of the nuvela. It formed quite the contrast against the meticulous symmetry and design of their houses—or even against the indoor shops of Berkha Tor’s wharf district. Several of Berkha

Tor's nobles and their household servants meandered between tents and stalls, arranging their trades with the foreigners. While Veilon always arranged private trades with passing rulers, nobles of all nuvelas would host private market trades for those with spices to spend. Nearby the shopping nobles, several Arceturan guards clad in awkward bright red padded defensive jackets stood attentively. Their ears had notches taken out of them.

Telior was gawking too. Keiyan shook his head. They didn't have time for this. The market would shut down soon. "There's the governor's arms dealer," Keiyan said, gesturing across the narrow market. "Let's go." The area was too cluttered for flying, so they dodged between customers on foot. Several merchants stepped out from their booths to grab their attention, but Keiyan brushed past them. He hated aggressive merchants like this. They had come here for one purpose: weapons.

A variety of sharpened out wood spears, bone-tipped arrows, scythla bows, wooden-bladed axes and blunt war clubs spread across the tables under the weapon seller's canopy. They walked up to the tables and the older man standing behind them. He had notches taken out of the tops of his ears as well. It must be the identity mark of their nuvela. Time for business.

The man glanced at them but said nothing. Not a great business practice, but Keiyan knew what type of seller he was dealing with. Governors generally made a relative the weapons seller for the nuvela and rarely gave them a share of the profits. As a result, most weapons sellers were disengaged, arrogant nobles who thought selling to foreigners was beneath them.

Keiyan shook his head. He'd almost become one of them once—Veilon even made him Berkha Tor's weapons seller. But that was before he had publicly renounced Veilon. He leaned

forward to inspect the displayed weapons. They certainly seemed to be up to the quality of the weapons they could purchase on Berkha Tor.

But they weren't here for these kinds of weapons.

Telior cleared his throat and looked up at the seller. "Good morning," he said in Common.

The seller's gaze flicked toward him. "You want something?"

"We're looking for weapons," Telior said, "of a kind we can't obtain on our own nuvela." While Telior tended to be quiet and introverted in everyday life, when he had a plan for persuading others, he tended to be pretty good at it. Keiyan still had to be ready to step in and improve if things went south, though.

The man's eyes narrowed, causing the birthmark across his cheek to stretch. "What do you want?"

"Only an opportunity for good business," Telior recited calmly. "We hail from the passing nuvela of Berkha Tor and are looking for weapons sturdier and more reliable than those out for display."

Keiyan glanced around to make sure none of the other nobles from Berkha Tor were close enough to hear Telior in the din of the marketplace. Thankfully, no one else was paying attention.

The man waved his hand at them. "I'm not here to play around. If you want to illegally purchase metal weapons, look elsewhere."

Telior stepped closer to him and pulled up the sleeve of his shirt to show Berkha Tor's "X" shaped identity mark cut into his skin. "I'm sure you've noticed our un-notched ears, and when Veilon traded with your uncle, you certainly saw that this is our identity mark. We aren't citizens of Arceture."

The seller didn't bat an eye. "My uncle made a deal with your governor that we wouldn't sell iron to unauthorized individuals. Take what's out here or move along."

"Everyone makes deals with neighboring nuvelas not to sell metal weapons. It doesn't mean they're enforced. Our nuvela will be gone by tomorrow. Besides..." Telior paused. "We're willing to pay extra the normal selling price. Could be additional value for your uncle's pockets... or your own."

For a moment, the seller seemed to consider that. Then he spoke. "There's a lot of your nuvela's nobles still walking around here. Think they'll take kindly to treaty breaking? Because I sure don't."

"There's a reason we came toward the end of the market hours," Telior said. "We're willing to settle after they leave."

"My uncle will ask about the lower inventory."

Keiyan rolled his eyes. Was this man really clueless enough not to know how to handle simple sleights-of-hand like this? At the very least, the seller seemed to be taking their proposal more seriously.

"Just add what we purchase to what our governor's authorized seller bought," Telior said.

“*If* I were willing to sell, my prices would be high. 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 in the skies, you know.”

Keiyan smiled. As much as Telior over-relied on his plans, they were certainly working.

Telior knew that as well. “We’re rich men. We know the cost of importing iron from the earth and are ready to purchase over a dozen swords if you have them.”

“You have enough spices for that?”

“Not spices—junipa beads.” Telior slipped his hand into his pocket. “Harvested from an albino junipa beads approximately six to seven hundred years ago.” He pulled out a magenta eye-ball sized orb which glistened in the light of the sun. The seller’s eyes widened.

“We have several more where that came from,” Telior said, rotating the orb as he spoke. “A valuable price for a valuable product.”

The seller pursed his lips, but Keiyan could see it in his eyes. They had him. Swords sold for a high price since they all had to be imported from the earth beneath. And when they had enough money to purchase over a dozen? Just a moment, and he would agree to sell.

“Well,” a voice rang out in the home language of Berkha Tor, “you never know who you’re going to run into on a passing nuvela, do you?”

Telior instantly pocketed the bead. Keiyan whirled around to see a noble coming up to them. Prouenor. While the man wasn’t one of Berkha Tor’s top nobles, he had risen quickly in their ranks over the past few years.

He was exactly what they didn’t need right now.

Keiyan could almost hear Telior's mental plans crumbling. This is why you had to be ready to improvise on the fly. "What do you want?" Keiyan said in Common. "I see enough of you nobles on Berkha Tor." The dealer better be able to take a hint.

"Some of us don't have the privilege of being the governor's sons and thus have to work for a living," Prouenor replied. Three of his men walked up to the booth with him. "If you would excuse me, I need to make some purchases." He strode up to the seller. "Good afternoon. My name is Prouenor and I hail from Berkha Tor." He slid up his sleeve to show the seller his identity mark. "Our governor should have already communicated that I'm authorized to buy iron. I'd like to purchase twenty of your best swords."

Twenty? There would hardly be any left by the time he was done!

The seller raised his eyebrows. "Normally a large number of iron swords is worked out in the governors' official trade deal."

Prouenor shook his head. "They're not for the governor." He glanced at Keiyan and smirked. "Your father chose my house to escort him at the festival."

At the festival? What was he talking about? But Keiyan only shook his head. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

Prouenor rolled his eyes. "I suppose not. You never did appreciate the allure of power when it was in your grasp, and now you can only watch as it trickles through your fingers. Or are you too virtuous to admit the value of publicly accompanying your father when he tours the festival?"

Keiyan narrowed his eyes. Veilon never made planned public appearances like this.

“What kind of swords are you looking for?” The seller asked as he stepped back to the large chest in the back of the tent.

“Only your best iron. It’s got to accompany the governor after all.”

The seller began to bring swords out from the chest and put them on the table for Prouenor and his men’s inspection. Keiyan couldn’t believe Prouenor had enough money to purchase *twenty* iron swords at once. They had taken a decade to accumulate enough stolen money from Veilon to afford forty for their movement!

But that wasn’t what he should be focusing on right now. Prouenor had mentioned something that was far more important. If Keiyan could only pry out a few more details.

“I didn’t realize my father needed that many guards when he has Zariel by his side,” Keiyan said, stepping toward him. “Or are you overcompensating for the poor skills of your men?”

“Oh, shut it,” Prouenor snapped. “It’s not about the need for protection: it’s about the show of power as we escort him around the Shackles.” He turned back to the seller. “How much are you asking for these?”

“A bushel of sinna spice for each.”

“I’ll give you sixteen for the lot of them,” Prouenor said. “Where else will you get someone buying this many at once?”

Keiyan stepped back as they haggled. His heart beat quickly. Veilon hated public gatherings. But if he was actually planning on attending one for the first time in a decade...

A few bright-red guards from Arceture walked past. Nearby, a plethora of birds fluttered around in a variety of ornate cages. The merchant seemed to be trying to sell them and their cages to passing nobles. There almost appeared to be a fondness in how this man treated the birds. Keiyan scratched his head. Seemed like an odd way to buy meat.

“Have fun getting your slingshots or whatever else you and Telior are purchasing.” Prouenor clapped a hand on Keiyan’s shoulder as he walked past, followed by guards carrying his purchases. “I’ll see you at the nuvela.”

Keiyan watched Prouenor carefully as he left. The noble had already told him more than he realized. Then he stepped back toward the seller. Telior was already there.

“So,” the seller said. His eyes had narrowed considerably since they’d last talked. “The governor’s sons.”

Keiyan saw ahead to the agent’s concern. “We legitimately want swords. It’s not a trap.”

The seller shrugged. “I already said I wasn’t selling.”

No. “Stop it. We can’t be the first sons who’ve dreamed of overthrowing their father.” Their motivations weren’t like those of most. But he wouldn’t get into distinctions.

The seller said nothing.

He needed something more. “You saw how that noble brushed us aside like we were nothing,” Keiyan said. “If we were plants for the governor, would someone treat his sons like that?”

“So you’re rebels whom the governor dislikes so much that random nobles feel comfortable treating you like trash. Why are you still alive?”

Telior wasn't coming in to help, so Keiyan had to press forward. Unfortunately, he didn't have a great answer. Their relationship with Veilon was complicated, and a stronger governor *would* have punished them already.

“Just because your father dislikes you enough to disown you doesn't mean he's necessarily prepared to kill you,” Keiyan finally said.

The seller pursed his lips. For several moments he didn't say anything. Then: “I suppose he wouldn't have flipped you off if you had a good relationship with your father,” he muttered. He looked up at them. “How much do you have?”

In total, the dealer only had six swords to sell when it was all said and done. Less than they would have liked to purchase, but there was little they could do after Prouenor's purchases.

Keiyan watched from his vantage point on the high cliffs of Arceture as Yerelor's two workers flew away off from the nuvela back toward Berkha Tor with the wrapped sword bundles. Yerelor, a Freeholder who worked for himself instead of the nobles, would make sure they were taken properly to their hideout. The nobles had finished their purchases long ago and Arceture had drifted quite the distance away from Berkha Tor already. But Keiyan was still pondering Prouenor's words.

He turned toward Telior, who leaned against the tall rectangular building behind him. “Veilon's preparing for a festival.”

Telior shrugged. “It’s the three hundredth anniversary of when Berkha Tor became the first nuvela to beat Tyrantor’s army. It’s our only claim to the world stage, so I’m not surprised he’s throwing a festival.”

It certainly made sense that there would be a festival to celebrate the defeat of one of the only fylen in history who had managed to rule over several nuvelas despite their constant random voyages throughout the sky. Especially one who controlled *hundreds* at the height of his power. But... “That’s not my point. Veilon *never* presents himself at public events.”

Telior shrugged. “I gave up trying to predict him long ago. And honestly? I’m just glad to have not been caught.” He shook his head. “That was too close.” He spread his wings to leave.

“No,” Keiyan said. “Stop.” His mental gears churned. “You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand?” Telior turned toward him.

“Think of all the people milling around a public festival,” Keiyan said. “And Veilon right in the middle of it all. How many guards could he afford to have around him in the midst of that?”

For a moment, Telior said nothing. Then: “What are you suggesting?”

“I know this would ruin your plans to rebel in thirteen months,” Keiyan said. “But out there, he won’t have the defenses he has in the palace. For the first time in years, he’s committing to be somewhere in public—and he’ll be surrounded by noisy, energetic Shacklers who could be turned at a moment’s notice if someone put the idea of revolt in their heads. He’d have nowhere to escape to.”

Telior blinked rapidly and he sat down on the ground. “Are... are you saying?”

Keiyan nodded slowly. “If what the noble said was correct... we could depose Veilon next month instead of next year.”