

J O H N B R O W N

S E R V A N T
O F A
D A R K G O D



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SERVANT OF A DARK GOD

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For Nellie

*The Goat King danced the crags by day,
At night he came to feed,
And dupe the foolish farmer's wives
To hold his monstrous breed.
The husbands sought to hunt him down
And take him as he lay,
But the wily King, with a wicked touch,
Stole their souls away.*

CONTENTS

1. Thieves 13
2. Stag Home 19
3. Chase 24
4. Bounty 28
5. The Hunt 38
6. King's Collar 41
7. The Courage of Women 50
8. Prey 58
9. Hatchling 66
10. Battle 75
11. Hunters 88
12. The Mother 98
13. Snare 105
14. Fugitives 114
15. Purity 123
16. Breach 138
17. Soul Meat 145
18. A Cold Kiss 151
19. Summons 168
20. Snake Games 187
21. The Divine 196
22. Riders 208
23. Scent 212
24. Trees 214
25. A Shortness of Breath 218
26. Baker's Herbs 221
27. The Glass Master's Daughters 226
28. Alliances 240
29. Fright 247
30. Secrets 252
31. A Broken Wing 267
32. Spoor 275
33. Body and Soul 279
34. Sacrifice 285
35. Pursuit 300

36.	Crossroad	304
37.	Sleth	310
38.	Traps	317
39.	Koramite	329
40.	The Thrall of Mokad	331
41.	Muster	347
42.	Like a Spider	359
43.	Hag's Teeth	366
44.	The Monster's Lair	378
45.	The Grove	389
46.	Mantle and Crown	394
47.	Master of the Harvest	407
48.	Shim	423
49.	Farewell	436
	Terms and People	443
	Acknowledgments	447

1

THIEVES

Talen sat at the wooden table in nothing but his underwear because he had no pants. Somehow, during the middle of the night, they had walked off the peg where he'd hung them. And he'd searched high and low. The last of their cheese was missing as well.

The cheese he could explain: if you were hungry and a thief, then cheese would be a handy meal to take. But it was not the regular poverty-stricken thief who roamed miles off the main roads, risked entering a house, and passed up many other fine and more expensive goods to steal a pair of boy's dirty trousers hanging on a peg in the loft.

No, there wasn't a thief in the world that would do that. But there was an older brother and sister.

Talen had two pair of pants to his name. And he wasn't about to ruin his good pair by working in them. He needed his work pants. And to get those, he needed leverage. The good news was that he knew exactly which items would provide that leverage.

It only took a few moments to find and hide them. Then he went back to the house, cut three slices of dark bread, and put them on a plate in the middle of the table next to the salted lard.

River, his sister, came in first from outside carrying a massive armload of rose stems clustered with fat rose hips. Talen sighed. She already had fifteen bushels of the stuff in the back. Were they going to make rose hip syrup for the whole district? And he knew he'd be the one that would have to cut each and every hip and remove the seeds so her syrup didn't end up tasting like chalk. It was a thorny business, even if he did wear gloves.

River walked to the back room to deposit her load and returned. Blood spattered her apron. A thick spray ran from her cheek to throat.

"What happened to you?"

“Black Jun,” she said. “The cow that was bred by that rogue bull, her water broke last night, but the calf was too big for a normal birth.” She shook her head. “Jun’s brother-in-law from Bain cut into the cow this morning and made a mess of it.”

“Did she die?” asked Talen.

“Not yet,” said River, “but such a wound, even with old Nan’s poultice, would take a Divine’s hand to keep it from corruption.” River had been apprenticed to Nan, who had midwived as many cattle as she had humans. That’s where River learned how to take a calf that couldn’t be pulled, by cutting in from the side. That’s where she’d learned about the virtues of everything from pennyroyal to seeding by moonlight. She could have learned far more, but old Nan went out late in a rainstorm one night and tumbled down a steep slope to her death. Even so, as unfinished apprentice, if River said the wound was bad, it was bad.

“And the calf?” asked Talen.

“Saved,” she said. “For now.” She took off her bloody apron and hung it on a peg on the wall.

Under the apron, River was wearing her work pants, which would have been a much easier mark for a clothing thief since River’s room was on the first floor of the house. Of course, she’d only point out that nobody would look for pants in a girl’s room. Which was true for most women, but River wasn’t most women. She wore pants to everything but the dances and festivals, and even then she threatened to do so. Skirts were a bother in the fields, she said. A bother on a horse, and a bother when hunting. And nobody was going to tell River otherwise.

Talen gave his bloody sister his most pleasant smile.

She looked at his bare chest and legs. “Where are your clothes?”

“That’s a good question,” said Talen.

River shook her head and went to the cupboard to get her pot of honey. She searched about and then turned around, looking as if she’d lost something.

Surprise, surprise.

There was nothing like her cinnamon honey. It was not the thick amber that most of the honey-crafters sold. This honey was thin and clear and tasted like moonlight. River got it from a lovesick dyer who lived on the far side of the settlements and liked her despite her pants. He said the honey came from bees that made their hives in the cliffs there. He had also said that his love for her flowed like the nectar of the pale green flowers that clung to the cliffs, that she was his flower and he her bee, and that their pollinations would be more wild and splendid than anything a pot could contain. All of which proved that the dyer knew nothing of women. At least, not River. She had smiled at the dyer’s sentiments, but that didn’t make the dyer any less of an idiot or his hands any less blue. River was not a girl won with declarations of wild and amorous pollinations or delicious gifts, even if the gift was spiced honey that cost three weeks’ worth of labor.

Ke, Talen's older brother, walked in next with flecks of barley stalks caught in his tunic. Ke was built like a bull. In the summer he looked even more like one because he shaved his hair short. He did it, he said, to keep his head cool and make it easier to clean. But it also allowed others to see the thick muscles in his neck. He retrieved his bow and archer's bag from his bedroom. The bow was made with wood, horn, and sinew, and it was so powerful only someone with his massive strength could draw it more than half a dozen times. Da, because of his strength and size, was sometimes called Horse. Ke, having inherited all of Da's muscle, had picked up the name of Little Horse, but he wasn't a horse. That was too noble a creature. Ke was a bull, no doubt about it.

Talen, of course, inherited all the wit in the family, but nobody seemed to value that. He was never referred to as "the bright one" or "that great blaze of brains." Instead, he got names like Twig and Hogan's Runt.

Ke sat at the table. His bow was blackened with charcoal and linseed oil and then covered with a good layer of goose fat and beeswax to protect it from the wet. He'd always been an excellent archer. Da had seen to that. But Ke was now something more. He'd proven last year in the battles with the Bone Faces that he was an efficient killer as well. He pulled out his crock of goose fat to rub in yet another layer, then looked back into the bag. "Hey," he said, and opened the mouth of the sack wider to fish about in its contents.

"Lose something?" Talen asked.

"Where are my new bowstrings?" Ke said.

"Strange," said Talen. "All sorts of things going missing today." He tsked. "What a negligent bunch we must be."

It took River about two seconds to catch on. "I want my honey," she said.

"I want my trousers," said Talen.

Ke looked up from his sack. "You took my strings?"

"You took my trousers."

"What would I want with those?" asked Ke.

"What would I want with your bowstrings? They don't fit my bow."

River put her hands on her hips. "That honey has a special—"

"Oh, don't act like you're offended for the dyer," Talen said and began to work his way toward the door.

"Who said anything about him?" River asked. "That honey's imbued with vitality. Now, hand it over."

"Pants first," said Talen. He continued to move until he stood between them and the doorway.

Ke narrowed his eyes.

River cocked her head, threatening a fight. She tightened the yellow sash she used as a belt. This is what she did when she wanted to run. The two of them

exchanged an evil glance, and Talen knew if he sat where he was a moment more, they'd have him.

"Trousers!" he demanded. Then he dashed out of the house in his bare feet and underwear and into the yard.

To his surprise, Talen found Nettle, his cousin, opening the door to the smoke-house to get something to eat. He was supposed to be on a patrol with his Father, but Talen didn't care what he was supposed to be doing. He was here now, and could even the odds in this fight.

Ke and River charged out of the house hard on Talen's heels. At this point Talen was most worried about River. He darted left, and thanked his instincts. A short length of firewood flew past him. River, in addition to being a healer, was a thrower, deadly with spoons, pots, and sticks at twenty yards. She could whip off a wooden garden clog and fling it with ferocious aim at your head before you'd even taken five steps. Talen knew: he had the bumps to prove it.

Talen ran past Nettle. "Trip them!" he said.

Nettle, the Mokaddian traitor, did no such thing. He cut a link from one of the hanging sausage chains, took a fat bite, and stood back to enjoy the show.

Talen raced toward the woods beyond, but River had the angle on him and sprinted to cut him off. Thank the Six she hadn't had time to pick up anything but a stick. Talen veered toward the garden.

"Pick up the pace," Nettle called out. "They're gaining on you."

"Coward!" Talen yelled back. He dashed around the garden fence, turned to avoid Ke, ran back toward the house, and found himself boxed in between the midden and the barn.

He had two choices. He could make a run at one of his dear siblings and hope to blow by, or he could go up the old walnut tree and hope they would stay at the bottom and do nothing more than shout insults and threats up at him.

He wouldn't get by Ke and his long arms. Talen had enough room to get by River, but she was daring him, grinning at him to just try.

He made his decision.

Da had fashioned a wooden slab bench and put it next to the trunk of the giant walnut tree. Talen ran for the bench. When he was close enough, he took one running step to the bench then another to an old knob sticking out about five feet up the trunk. He followed the momentum upward, grabbed a branch, pulled himself up, and stood on a fat arm of the tree well out of the reach of his brother and sister.

"That's about the dumbest place you could have chosen," said Ke.

Talen climbed a few branches higher and looked down at the two of them. "The joke's up."

“We don’t have your hog-worn trousers,” said Ke. “You’re the one who loses things on a regular basis.”

Talen did not lose things on a regular basis.

He saw Ke bend over and pick up a number of rocks. “You come out of that tree or I’ll knock you out,” said Ke.

“No,” said Talen. “I think you need to give up your childish games.”

But Ke threw a rock instead.

Talen ducked. The rock flew straight and true and would have made a pretty bruise, but a small branch stood in the way and sent the rock wide. Goh, he needed to put more branches between him and those rocks, so Talen climbed until the branches were no bigger than his thumb.

He couldn’t see Ke or River from this height. Nettle stood over by the well, finishing his sausage, and using one hand to shade his eyes from the sun.

“You smelly bum,” Talen called down to him. “Do something!”

“Jump!” shouted Nettle. “He’s coming up.”

Talen heard the leaves rustling below as someone ascended toward him.

Nettle was a fine one to stand there and call out instructions. Talen must have been at least forty feet up in the air. The barn roof would have been perfect had it not been thirty feet away. There was nothing else around him but hard ground below. He had nowhere to go. He could not simply jump out of the tree at this height.

Ke was right—running up this tree had been idiotic.

He caught a glimpse of Ke climbing below him and to the left.

Maybe he could get around him. Talen did not want to be at his mercy in the tree. He climbed down toward Ke. He would get close, then move to the other side and away.

“I’m going to give you one last chance,” said Ke. He looked up at Talen with that happy look that said Talen was a rabbit and he was a dog that had just found his next meal. He was maybe only six feet away.

Talen scuffed the branch and sent small particles of bark down into Ke’s face.

Ke ducked, and Talen made his move. All he needed to do was get to a branch four feet below him and to the right. It would be a quick climb from there to the ground.

He swung down, but Ke had been expecting the move, and suddenly he was grabbing at Talen’s leg.

Talen moved out on his branch. Ke followed. Talen jumped for another branch. He grabbed it with both hands, pulled himself upward, but before he could get a leg up, the branch cracked and swung him to the side.

It was dead and rotted.

Talen looked for something else to grab, but he couldn't see anything close; then the branch popped again and broke entirely from the tree.

Talen reached out, grabbing for anything, but it was too late, and then he was falling headfirst. He yelled. He saw Ke's face then a wide-open space beyond with nothing between him and the ground but a branch that would most assuredly break his back.

2

STAG HOME

If this fall lamed Talen, he'd be good for nothing but the war weaves. An image of him at the wizard's altar in Whitecliff flashed in his mind, the Divine draining his Fire away, the essence that fueled the days of his life, so it could be used by a better vessel—by a dreadman. The dreadman would give Talen homage for the gift, but Talen didn't want any homage.

He yelled, a long “*Nooooooo!*”

A stick poked Talen's eye. Then his ankle caught, and Talen swung into the center of the tree and smacked his head.

Ke grunted. “Grab a branch,” he said.

Talen looked up. It felt like a piece of bark the size of his thumbnail was stuck in his eye; he could barely see, but it was clear that his ankle was caught not in a fork of two branches, but in Ke's iron grip. Ke bent over a branch holding on to Talen's ankle, his face set in determination.

“You're slipping,” he said.

Talen twisted around and finally found a branch. He grasped it with both hands. “I've got it. Let go.”

But Ke did not let go. He repositioned his grip and said, “You'll hang here until you tell us where you've hidden our stuff.”

Talen's eye ran like a river. “What about my trousers?”

“Goh,” said Ke. “If I come across your trousers I'm going to burn them. Then you'll have something to yell about.”

“Hoy! What's going on here?” It was Da, standing at the base of the tree.

“They've taken my work trousers,” said Talen.

“Is that so?” Da asked Ke.

Talen still hung mostly upside down, the blood rushing to his head.

“It is not,” said Ke.

“You three,” Da said. “Today I come out of the barn to find one of you hanging naked in a tree. What am I going to find tomorrow? Get down. Both of you.”

Ke looked down at Talen. “You’re lucky.” Then he flung Talen’s legs away.

Talen clutched the branch. His body swung around like a festival acrobat’s. His grip on the branch slid. Then he reached out with one foot and caught another branch to stand on.

Talen steadied himself. When he’d finally cleared his eye enough to see, Ke stood next to him. “You should thank me for saving your neck.”

“You’re the one that put me here,” Talen said.

“I’m the one who didn’t murder you,” he said, and then descended to the ground.

Murder indeed. Talen watched Ke go and realized the truth was he *had* been lucky. Lucky Ke had been that close. Lucky he’d tumbled just the right way for Ke to grab his ankle. And Ke had held him as if he were nothing more than a sack of potatoes. Why couldn’t he have gotten at least half of Ke’s strength?

He sighed. It was going to be annoyingly inconvenient to have to wear his fine pair of pants to work in. And at week’s end, when he cleaned them and hung them out to dry, he’d have to sit around in his underclothes and bat the biting flies away.

Talen climbed out of the tree and stood before Da.

“Did you look for the pants in the barn?” Da asked.

Of course he’d looked in the barn. He’d looked everywhere. “I’m not going to ruin my good pair.”

“Then work in a leaf skirt. I’m not buying any material for another pair. Nothing in heaven or earth will make me feed negligence.”

“I wasn’t negligent.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” said Da. “Put on your good ones. Get the peppercorns. You’re going to the village to get some hens from old Mol the fowler. I’ve had too many days without eggs.”

“Last night you said you wanted to see us up and in the fields with the barley.”

“Well, I’m saying right now that I want some hens. And you’re going to get them.”

“Shall I go along?” asked Nettle.

“No,” said Da. “You’re getting back on your horse to take a message to the Creek Widow.”

Nettle smirked. “The one who told you not to come around?”

“What other one is there?” asked Da. He held out a sealed letter to Nettle. The Creek Widow was a Mokaddian woman with a tenancy of almost twenty acres. She had been a family friend for years. But this last summer she had ordered Da out of her house and off her land. And try as Talen might, he could not get Da to tell him why. Talen suspected it had something to do with her perennial efforts to

marry Da off. Half the time Talen thought she wanted Da herself. But Da was stubborn. And Talen was happy about that. While she cooked food fit for a Divine, she was bossy and a bit odd, talking to vegetables and rocks and always smelling a little like a goat.

Was this letter an indication that Da was making up?

“Paper,” said Nettle, a tease in his eye. “You must be serious.” He held the letter up to the sun as if trying to read it.

“You break that seal,” Da said, “and I’ll have your hide.”

“I wouldn’t dare touch it,” said Nettle.

“Then go,” said Da. He shooed them both away. “Be gone. And hurry back. I don’t want to lose any of that barley.”

Talen pushed the cart and the empty chicken baskets through the three miles of the muggy woods to Stag Home. When he finally broke onto the broad valley, he was so refreshed by the sunlight and breeze, so soothed by the smooth, sun-warmed dirt of the road under his bare feet that he didn’t immediately notice the fields and orchards.

Instead, he basked in the glory of the day and the fact that not only had he escaped being maimed this morning, but he’d also avoided a number of hours sweating in the barley. The peppercorns hung in a pouch around his neck. It had been two years since any merchant had sold peppercorns in the New Lands and the value of pepper had risen.

Talen looked forward to seeing if the alewife’s daughter would be selling her vegetables again. She was a looker, that one, with her dark hair, jade eyes, and the fabulous lines of her long neck. During his last visit, he’d ended up returning to her table thrice, buying a bunch of carrots each time, just so he could fix her features in his mind. And it hadn’t all been one-sided. She had glanced his way when he stood across the road eating some of her wares.

Talen’s reverie of the alewife’s daughter broke when he pushed the cart past an orchard of apple trees bent with clusters of red and yellow fruit. There should have been children climbing with baskets in the tops of those trees. Instead, the apple baskets lay scattered on the ground.

Across from the orchard a yearling calf bawled outside a field. The calf searched along the fence separating it from its mother and a dozen others who stood with their noses down among the ripe white oats mixed with peas. There should have been a harvest master there promising someone a proper beating for letting the cattle in, but there wasn’t even a beggar to chase the greedy guts out.

How could that be? Talen searched the fence lines and long rock walls. He searched the fields—nothing but a small carpet of blackbirds picking through a

swath of barley that had been harvested and left to lie where it fell. There wasn't a body to be seen. It was as if the villagers had fled the fields.

Alarm scuttled like a crab up his neck. This was the fat season for pillaging. Of course, the Bone Faces hadn't attacked Stag Home or any of the surrounding villages for years. But that's precisely why Stag Home would be a perfect target. The villagers would have grown overly secure, just as Talen had.

What's more, the Bone Faces took more than livestock and goods. They took men, women, and children. Lords, he thought, if one of those Bone Faces got him, he will have wished he had fallen out of that tree and broken his back. He scanned the fields again, this time looking for signs of a raiding party.

It was said that when the Bone Faces kidnapped you for their slave ships, they cut off the pinky finger of your right hand. Then, with some black and feral magic, they used your finger to bind you to them. And so perverting was the binding that you never once wanted to even pine after what you'd lost. All your thought was to serve your master every day that blood flowed in your veins.

One of the first things they'd ask you to do, which you would do with joy, was to trick your own kin into their traps. And so it was that whole families disappeared. Some were enslaved, others were sent to the fearsome altars of Ishgar as sacrifices, for the Bone Faces were a bloody people. But Talen figured those who went to the altars met with a better end, for if the rumors were true, the Bone Face bindings were strong enough to compel a slave beyond this life and into the world of the dead.

He imagined the fate of his pinky. The Bone Face slave masters hung the fingers of their most valued slaves about their necks. The rest they locked up in a special room. And when guests came to call, especially if the slave master was wealthy with dozens of formidable slaves listed among his assets, he would take his guests into the finger room and show off his collection of desiccated and rotting digits, just as a good Koramite wife might show off her collection of dishes or lace.

There was no sign of struggle in the fields. The clans sent patrols along the coastlines during the harvest season. Last year there had been battles, but those had been far out on the Finger Islands, not on the mainland settlements. Nothing this year. But it had to be Bone Faces. What else would make the villagers flee the fields on such a fine day for work?

Goh, but how he wished Da and Ke were here with him. If he only had his bow; that would improve his odds. Da, a Koramite bow master, had taught his sons well. Talen could shoot eight arrows a minute, and not to simply fill the sky with a haphazard rain of death. No, Talen could fire at that speed and hit what he was aiming at.

But he didn't have his bow. All he had was his knife and a pile of chicken baskets, which meant he'd have to slice open his own neck if the blighters got to

him, for he wasn't going to be turned into a villain, nor would he allow himself to be used as feed for their terrible gods.

Talen thought he might be able to lose any pursuers in the thickness of the woods. But who was to say they hadn't already circled behind him? Besides, the safety of the village with its embankment walls was much closer.

Smoke trailed into the sky from behind the walls of the village. But it was thin, not the thick smoke of burning homes. Upon the timber and earthen wall he saw the glint of three men wearing helmets and carrying spears. The gates stood closed, which only confirmed his assessment of the situation.

Talen looked back at the woods once more. He searched along the tree line following the river that snaked its way through the valley, but saw no shallow-bottomed ship's mast. Perhaps they had landed farther downriver. Perhaps the village had been forewarned and the raiders had yet to attack.

He quickened his pace. He did not want to be caught outside the gates. The cart and chicken baskets clattered along the dirt road as he went. He watched the shadows and trees. He kept an eye on the fields. He prepared himself, at the first sign, to run.

He passed two large wicker creels on the bank of the river. One had toppled over. Its lid hung loose, and a tangle of fat, brown eels wriggled their way back toward the water. The sight raised the hackles on the back of his neck, and Talen began to run.

Down the dirt road he went, and then it was over the bridge. On the far side of the bridge, one of the chicken baskets bounced off, but Talen paid it no mind and let it lie in the grass on the side of the road. He didn't stop until he stood outside the gates.

The Mokaddian guards up on the wall were not looking out—they were looking in. The beef-heads were not going to see any threat coming that way. "Hoy!" Talen called.

The three guards turned.

One was that maggot Roddick, the cartwright's son who had tormented Talen with rotten plums when he was a boy.

"Let me in," said Talen.

"You," said Roddick in disgust. "Stay right where you are!"

3

CHASE

Technically a Mokaddian village couldn't refuse entrance to Talen just because he was a Koramite. Even though the Koramites had been conquered and paid tribute to their Mokaddian masters, they still maintained some rights, and refuge was one of them. But that didn't mean they would open to him. Roddick yelled down to those within.

This village had fallen once, before it had a wall. The Bone Faces had rowed two of their small galleys up the river to a bend at the edge of the fields. They attacked just before dawn, setting the homes ablaze, running many good men through with their curved swords, and stealing anything of value, including fifteen young girls. The next year, the village built the wall.

The wall had been made by digging a wide ditch and throwing up an embankment of earth about three times the height of a tall man. Timber spikes had been planted into that steep slope and at the bottom of the ditch. Grass and tall thistle now hid many of the spikes, but any host charging up that hill would find the spikes' power to impale undiminished. And if the host reached the top, they'd face a timber palisade and tower. The timbers had been new when Talen was a boy. Pale yellow lichen now clung to much of the wood, but it was sturdy nevertheless.

He expected they'd be happy to give him a bow and set him up on the wall with Roddick. But there were no raiders, no sign of any struggle whatsoever. So why had they closed the gates?

The crossbar that held the gates closed scraped. Then the gates swung open.

Out walked a dozen Mokaddian men holding their scythes, sickles, and forks like weapons. About half had shaved their heads and dyed their scalps with henna, bearing witness that they'd performed their harvest worship.

Talen glanced over his shoulder, fearing the Bone Faces had decided to attack,

but there were no Bone Faces, only the river glistening in the sun and the fields of grain beyond, rolling with the breeze. When he turned back, one of the beef-heads on the wall was stringing his bow.

“It’s one of Hogan’s half-breeds,” said farmer Tilth. He held his hay fork before him as if Talen were the Dark One himself. “What are you doing here, boy?” asked Tilth.

“I’ve come to trade with Mol,” said Talen.

“He’s spying!” Roddick called from above.

Spying?

“Cast your weapons from you,” Roddick commanded. “Then lie down in the dirt.”

“You bum brain!” Talen yelled up at Roddick. “Who would want to spy on you? And I don’t have any weapons. Unless you think I might kill someone with these chicken baskets.”

“Give yourself up,” said Tilth.

Long Lark, the cooper’s son, stood next to Tilth. He tied a cattle noose at the end of one rope.

Talen looked at the men. There were the Early brothers, the one-eyed tanner and his two sons, and the young hayward who had killed a wurm not two weeks ago and received the intricate tattoo around the wrist of his right hand that signified he was no longer a boy, but a man of the Shoka clan.

These people knew him.

The men began to fan out.

“I’m honored,” said Talen, “but isn’t this a bit much for a runt like me?”

“He’s going to run,” Roddick called.

“I’m not running,” said Talen.

“Come on, son,” Tilth said.

They approached him like one might a boar caught in a trap: careful and bent on injury.

A flash of orange caught Talen’s eye, and he spotted a tall, bald man with an enormous black beard standing in the gateway. He was an official, wrapped in the blue and orange sash of the Mokaddian Fir-Noy Clan.

Fear shot through him, and Talen took a step back.

The Fir-Noy had shed plenty of Koramite blood over the years. That was not to say the Koramites hadn’t defended themselves. But everyone knew that Koramite and Fir-Noy didn’t mix. Lords, Fir-Noy didn’t mix with half of the Mokaddian clans, especially not the Shoka of Stag Home.

But there stood that Fir-Noy official, acting like he owned the place, and here the Shoka village men had their tools pointed at him as if he were a rabid dog.

By law, if a Koramite heard a Mokaddian cry out for help and did not run to the Mokaddian's aid, the Koramite would be punished. Depending on the urgency of the situation, he might be whipped. The law, however, did not go both ways. Talen's cries to be rescued from these madmen would go unheeded.

"I'm here for chickens," he protested.

It was then that Long Lark broke from the pack and set himself to throw his noose.

Talen hesitated for a fraction of a second.

Long Lark adjusted his grip on the noose.

By the farting lord of pigs, Talen thought. *I've done nothing. Nothing at all.*

Koramites had been dragged behind horses before. Not here, of course, in a Shoka village. Not yet. But these were Mokaddians, after all. Fir-Noy, Vargon, or Shoka—did it matter which clan they belonged to?

He looked into their eyes and saw it did not. Talen took a step backward.

Long Lark swung his noose.

In his mind's eye, Talen saw himself hanging from the village wall with that noose around his neck. The thought jolted him. And despite his earlier protestations, he turned tail and ran.

A shout rose up behind him so full of menace that it almost loosed his bowels.

He stretched his stride, expecting that noose to fall about his shoulders or to catch an arrow in his back. He ran like a thief, like a rabbit coursed by dogs. He ran with the speed only fear and bewilderment bring.

He sprinted back over the bridge and thought he saw the flash of an arrow out of the corner of his eye. He needed to make the woods, the only place where he might have a chance to lose these madmen. Back up the road he ran, the dirt hard under his bare feet.

Talen was not the fastest runner in the district, but he wasn't the slowest either. He knew he should measure his pace, but he'd seen that lazy-eyed Sabin among them, him and his shaved head and violent speed, and Talen sprinted for all he was worth.

He could hear the men behind him and pushed himself until his breath came in ragged gasps and his head felt dizzy. But it did not last. By the time he reached the oat field the rogue cows had broken into, his lungs and legs were burning, and he had to stop. He panted and turned.

Sabin, a look of murder in his eyes, was almost upon him.

Movement farther up the road drew his attention: a rider galloping toward him on a horse. They were boxing him in.

Lords, but he had to make the woods.

Two more ragged breaths and he hopped the fence on his left and the fieldstones piled up next to it and struggled up a fallow field of knee-high grass.

The tall grass pulled at his feet. The slope sapped his strength. But neither seemed to slow Sabin.

The woods stood only a few paces away.

Talen glanced back to see Sabin reach out with his long tattooed arm for Talen's hair.

River loved Talen's hair. Loved it long. And at that moment he wished he'd never listened to his sister and her stupid appraisals of men.

Sabin grabbed a handful of Talen's hair. He yanked, brought Talen up short, then backward to the ground.

Talen scrambled to his knees, but Sabin kicked his side and knocked the breath right out of him.

He couldn't move, couldn't breathe. By the time his body finally remembered it had lungs, the rest of the men were rushing up the hill.

Sabin kicked at Talen's face, but Talen curled up and the blow glanced off the back of his head.

Someone struck him with a staff. Another kick caught him in the hip.

Talen tried to get up and lunge out of the circle, but before he could get his legs, one of the tanner's boys landed a blow to Talen's head that dazed him and knocked away all sense of balance. He turned, falling, and saw a sea of men.

Someone kicked him in the back and the pain made him gasp. Someone else went for his neck.

Talen brought his arms up to shield his face.

"Where's that rope?" one of them shouted.

Talen tried to roll over.

"Out of the way!" someone shouted.

"Now you'll get it, half-breed," a man said.

The blows lessened and then stopped. Talen glanced up.

Sabin stood above him, lifting what must have been a forty-pound fieldstone the color of fresh liver.

He raised it high, preparing to crack Talen's head like a nut.

4

BOUNTY

Talen rolled away, trying to escape Sabin's stone.
"Hold!" someone shouted.
A horse snorted.

Talen tried to dart through the legs of the men surrounding him and was flung back to the ground. He froze, cringed, waiting for the crushing stone. But it did not fall.

"Twenty stripes, Sabin," a man said. "I swear it!"

Talen glanced up. The men were not looking at him. They were looking at the bailiff of Stag Home who sat upon his dappled gray horse, glaring at Sabin. It was he who had been the rider bearing down on Talen from the other direction.

Sabin hesitated, and then, almost in defiance, he dropped the stone perilously close to Talen's head.

"That," said the bailiff, pointing at Sabin, "has just made you my riding horse."

The bailiff was not a large man. But he was strong and fearless in battle. His face was shaven close, which revealed three scars where a bear had tried to take off his jaw. But it was his eyes, as pale as the horse upon which he rode, that fixed Talen's gaze. Those eyes had scared Talen as a boy. He had thought the man was full of evil. His father had convinced Talen otherwise, but, faced with those eyes, Talen could never maintain his certainty.

The bailiff directed that hard gaze at the other men. "What is this here? Why are the fields empty?"

"There are Koramite Sleth about," someone said.

Sleth? Soul-eaters?

Sleth were those who had given themselves over to Regret, the one Creator of seven who, when he'd seen what he and the seven other Creators had wrought, recognized that it was flawed and despised the work of his hands. To the men,

women, and children who came into his twisted power, he gave horrible gifts—unnatural strength and appetites, odd growths and manifestations of beasts, and the power, with a touch, to steal Fire and soul. The stories of Sleth and the hunts the righteous led against them were legion.

Had Talen heard that right?

“This one ran like a monster,” one of the men said.

“Yes,” said the bailiff. “But it appears you caught him anyway.”

Talen looked up at the bailiff, but a wave of pain and nausea slammed into him, and he was forced to turn and vomit into the grass. He hurt everywhere.

“Get up,” said the bailiff.

Talen gagged once more, spit. He took three breaths to steady himself. He was dizzy and shaking.

He got to one knee. Something was running out of his nose. He wiped his face with his sleeve expecting blood, but it was nothing more than snot. There was a ringing in his ears, and he didn’t know if he could stand.

But he did know one thing: he would not show weakness. Not in front of these men.

Two more breaths. He could barely open one of his eyes.

Goh, these arrogant Mokaddian garlic-eaters. This would go to the Koramite Council. And the Council would take it to the Shoka lords. He was within his rights—every one of these men should pay! And that thought was enough to take the edge off the flood of tears pushing up within.

Talen stood. He almost toppled over, but then his dizziness seemed to recede.

Two other horsemen rode up from the village and joined the bailiff. One was the bald Fir-Noy he had seen at the gate. His black beard and eyebrows were even bushier than they had first appeared. His Mokaddian wrist tattoo with its boar’s tusk had been extended up his forearm, showing not only his clan, but also the military order to which he belonged. The other Fir-Noy was a small man, a messenger. He rode a horse that was lathered and blowing from a long gallop.

The bearded Fir-Noy shifted on his saddle and the leather creaked under him. “We tried to find you, Zu,” he said to the bailiff. “There’s been a Sleth hunt, and it appears that things have taken a turn for the worse.”

The bailiff turned. “A Sleth hunt?”

The messenger eyed Talen, then addressed the bailiff. “We identified the parents of the abomination pulled from the river. Yesterday, our forces closed in on Sparrow, the Koramite master smith of the village of Plum. But things did not go as planned. His two hatchlings escaped. And then some Sleth spawn came back and slaughtered a family in the village.”

Except for the buzzing in Talen’s head there was dead silence. Sleth, he thought. What are these men doing wasting their time chasing me? They should be out—

Then his brain processed that last statement. There were Sleth among the Koramites, among Talen's people.

"We have reports," the messenger continued, "that they were spotted in this district. A Koramite girl and her blind brother." He turned to the men. "There's a sizeable bounty for any who bring them in, dead or alive. A miller's annual wage."

The reports of Sleth that sailors brought this spring had given him nightmares. A Sleth wife taken in Mokad who had filed her teeth into sharp fangs—they'd all thought it was to make her more fearsome in battle. But the hunters discovered the true reason when they broke open her smokehouse and found the bodies of four men hanging, butchered and half cured.

And that was just this year. There were stories of Sleth stealing your soul away, then walking about in your body. Sleth growing horns, growing gills so they could swim in close and drag unsuspecting fishermen into the watery depths. Sleth were forever stealing sisters, wives, and husbands to use in unnumbered abominations.

If these men thought he was associated with Sleth . . .

Or was this simply another Fir-Noy scheme?

He realized it didn't matter at this point. If these men thought he associated with such evil, then his life floated like a piece of duff over a bonfire.

"What are you doing here?" asked the bailiff.

"Trading for chickens, Zu," said Talen. "That was my crime."

"Then why did you run?" asked the Fir-Noy.

What a stupid question. "It's hard to tell," said Talen. "I'm usually quite solid when facing a charge of Mokaddian villagers."

Of course, stupidity was bred into the Fir-Noy. Their clan was forever trying to stir all the others up to push the Koramites into the sea. It was probably this man who started this whole thing.

Sabin clopped Talen on the head and sent him reeling to his knees. "Respect your betters."

Talen steadied himself and stood again. The right side of his rib cage pained him. He took in a large breath, expecting to feel the sharp pain of a broken bone. There was a twinge, but it didn't feel like it came from a break.

He looked at the bailiff. "I'm sorry, Zu. Let me restate."

"No," said the bailiff. "There's no need to restate." His face was full of a pent-up anger. "There soon won't be any chickens, Talen. There will be nothing for you Koramites. You squander opportunity after opportunity, your race. You can't keep yourselves clean, can you?"

"Zu," said Talen. "All I did was come for layers. And these men, without provocation, set upon me."

“You ought to press him,” the Fir-Noy suggested. “Who knows how wide their network is? And think about it. I’m told this skinny thing is a half-breed. But not just any old mongrel. This one’s connected to high places, given special treatment. I’m told Argoth is going to adopt him into his family and give him a chance to earn the wrist of a Shoka man.” He spat at Talen’s feet. “This one can walk about and spy without being given a second glance.”

It was true Uncle Argoth and Da had recently talked about marrying Talen to a Mokaddian. It wasn’t necessary for him to be adopted into a Mokaddian family to do so. But it would smooth the process. However, there were some Shoka who thought it a scandal. Even among the Shoka of Stag Home there were still a few who still wondered how Talen’s mother, a Mokaddian of some station, could willingly debase herself and foul her offspring by marrying and mating Da, a full Koramite. There were those who saw her untimely death as a confirmation of that poor choice. Nevertheless, Uncle Argoth was determined to make him a full member of the clan, wrist tattoo and all.

“Are you spying?” asked the bailiff.

“Zu,” said Talen, “I mean no disrespect, but what would the purpose of such spying be? I have no idea what this is about.”

“Don’t feign ignorance,” the Fir-Noy growled.

“I am what you see,” Talen said to the bailiff. “Nothing more.”

“He’s lying,” said the Fir-Noy. “Take him and press the truth out.”

The bailiff turned to the Fir-Noy. “This is Shoka land, not Fir-Noy. Your news has caused trouble enough. I won’t let it bring murder to my fields.”

“Killing a Koramite isn’t murder.”

“It is here,” the bailiff said.

The Fir-Noy licked his fat lips and shook his head in disgust, but he made no reply.

Talen addressed the bailiff. “You know my family. Surely, you can’t think I am one of them.”

“I can think anything I want,” said the bailiff. “I stake my reputation vouching for you and your people. But your actions have begun to stain me.”

“No, Zu. Not mine. We carry no stain.” The bailiff *knew* him. Da had given his boy a foundling wildcat. He’d taught the bailiff himself a better way of drawing his bow. And, in return, the bailiff had invited Da on many a hunt. Surely, the bailiff’s vision would not be clouded with Fir-Noy rubbish.

The bailiff looked at Talen as if he were weighing him.

“I find no cause to accuse this boy,” the bailiff finally said. “Not today.”

Talen bowed in gratitude. “Zu, you are clear-sighted and wise.”

“Then prove me right. Packs of bounty hunters will begin to stalk these woods.

But if a Koramite were to bring the hatchlings in, that would say something, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," said the Fir-Noy. "It will say that Koramites, like crows, feed on the carrion of their own kind. It proves nothing."

Anger flashed up in Talen. Fir-Noy did nothing but pick and feed on the work of others. He knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't help himself. The words were leaping out before he knew what he was saying.

"Well, Zu," said Talen, "at least we're willing to make something useful of our carrion; it appears the Fir-Noy simply let theirs parade about full of maggots and stink."

Anger flushed the Fir-Noy's face, and he kicked his horse forward to get at Talen.

Talen cringed, but the bailiff grabbed the Fir-Noy's reins and pulled the horse up short.

"He'll take that back!" said the Fir-Noy. "I won't stand for this, Shoka land or no."

The bailiff turned to Talen. "This is the last time you can expect protection from your own stupidity. Apologize!"

"Yes," said Talen. "Of course." He faced the Fir-Noy and stood as tall as he could muster. "Zu, I've been knocked half out of my mind. I apologize. Such untruths are only given voice by fools."

"Rot," said the Fir-Noy. Then he wrenched the reins away from the bailiff. "Your territory lord will hear about this."

"I have no doubt," said the bailiff.

The bailiff turned to Talen, his pale eyes sending a trembling up Talen's back. "There's going to come a time, Talen, when there will be no one to hold such men back. And the Koramites will be purged. It might be already too late. Now, you tell your da I expect him to order the Koramites in my district. I expect assurances. And know this: we'll be picking over every rock and stone. And by the Goat King's hairy arse, we'll make no distinction between those who harbor hatchlings and those who practice the abominable arts. Now go."

Talen nodded. "Thank you, Zu." He began to walk back down the slope. "Excuse me," he said, trying to get past two of the men to go back to the bridge to fetch his cart.

"Where are you going?" the bailiff demanded.

"Zu?" asked Talen.

"I just gave you an order."

Talen paused. He could see no sympathy on the faces of the men. He wasn't stupid, but at the moment he felt very much like a dunce. Then he realized there would be no picking up his cart and baskets.

“Directly home,” said Talen, changing his course. “That’s where I’m going.”

The bailiff only looked at him with those pale eyes.

Talen walked across the field toward the trail. He hurt all over. But he could walk. He could breathe. And that was something to be thankful for. He remembered the peppercorns and felt to make sure bag was still hanging from his neck. He hadn’t lost those, yet another thing to be thankful for.

As he departed he heard the bailiff lecturing his men, but he was so rattled he couldn’t focus on what the man was saying.

Talen crossed the fence and began to follow the trail. He looked at the wood in front of him. The hatchlings had been seen in this district. And where would hatchlings hide?

They wouldn’t be here. Not right here. Of all the miles upon miles of woodland available, why would the Sleth hatchlings choose this little section of the district right here in front of him? The chances were so remote that it wasn’t worth thinking about. But his heart wasn’t listening to his mind. It was said Sleth needed to feed often on the Fire of other men. And a lone stripling walking in the cover of a thick wood was a perfect target.

Furthermore, Sleth never came alone. There was always a big nest of them. So it was likely there were more than this one family, which meant there were probably adults, full of the dark art, looking for those hatchlings as well.

And even if the Sleth didn’t find him, then there were the bounty hunters the bailiff had mentioned. Only the fiercest of men took it upon themselves to hunt Sleth. And because these Sleth had been found among Koramites, the hunters would suspect every Koramite they came across, and he did not want to fall into their hands for questioning.

He looked back at the bailiff and the village men making their way toward the river.

Goh, he thought. Mobs and monsters. Being chased about by Ke and River now seemed a pretty thing.

He faced the woods again. He didn’t have much choice. Besides, even if someone were waiting behind a bend in ambush, standing here like a coward wasn’t going to improve his odds.

He searched the ground for a sturdy stick and a few good throwing stones, and then Talen entered the wood.

Talen tried to keep himself from running. But the farther he got into the dark, old wood, the more he felt like a fat worm sinking on a hook into the water.

A fat worm that had already been worked over. He catalogued his pains. There were two spots on his head that hurt to touch them. There was his eye

that was now almost swollen shut. His ribs smarted. His kidneys, he was sure, had been abused. It hurt his back to walk. Lords, even his toes protested. He looked down, saw a smart bruise on his left foot and realized someone must have stomped it.

But these were physical pains. They would heal. At least, he hoped they would, especially the blows to his brain. The Sleth, on the other hand, were different. And he couldn't tell what would be worse: to be taken by the Bone Faces and forced into a nine-fingered enslavement or to be kept in storage like a living carcass, to be feasted upon or twisted into something unnatural. At least with the Bone Faces he'd die a man.

And how could he follow the bailiff's suggestion and bring in the hatchlings, the children of these Sleth? A proper Sleth hunt required one hundred men. It required a Divine. Was he expecting the Koramites to field groups of hunters? But the bailiff had been looking at him. It had been clear he was suggesting Talen join in the hunt. Except, what could one runt do?

If he had his bow, he might be able to do something. That is if the Sleth didn't know the arrow was coming. He'd heard once at an alehouse that Sleth could whisper to arrows. Even so, he didn't have his bow. He was defenseless. What were a few stones going to do against Sleth? The thing to do now was get back to Da and the others as quickly as he could and alert them.

The hatchlings were somewhere in these woods. He tried to act calm—the last thing prey should do is act like prey. But then the distinct thock of a branch breaking sounded off to his right followed by a squirrel screeching out a warning.

His heart leapt up into his throat. But he told himself it was a falling branch, told himself to stand upright and walk like a man. He quickened his pace despite the twinge in his back.

Then came a grunt and high keening, something moving toward him, scuffling through the leaves on the forest floor.

You are not prey, he told himself, you are not prey, but try as he might, he could not be calm. Could not walk. Could do nothing but abandon all pretense, ignore his injuries, and run.

Not once did he look back. He dared not. Eyes to the front, he told himself. He couldn't afford to smack into a branch or step wrong, or, most especially, see the face of the thing that surely was behind him. He knew if he saw the beast, his courage was likely to completely desert him. At that point it would be impossible to do anything but cringe upon the ground like a cornered rabbit. So it was eyes in front, even when the woods broke before him and he saw the river below and the farm stretching away from him on the far side.

Talen ran down to the river, stumbled through the shallow water of the ford,

and scabbled up the other side. Only when he reached the smoke shed did he stop and turn, and, with much panting, search the woods.

Nothing. Nothing at all.

The Sleth children, if there had ever been any, must have been one-legged pigeons. No regular monsters would have let him escape alive.

Of course, there probably hadn't been a thing in those woods besides squirrels and mice. The sound he'd heard was most certainly somebody's renegade pig.

Coward, he told himself, and bent over, resting his hands on his knees. He was such a coward.

"Where's the handcart?"

Talen turned. Da sat in the shady side of the barn, sharpening his scythe. Seeing that great horse of a man brought immense relief.

"Back at the bridge," said Talen. He took a breath.

"Ah, that's what I like to see. A boy who races home to work and leaves the chickens to fend for themselves."

"Da," said Talen. "The bailiff wants you."

"We're mowing the fields now. The bailiff can wait."

Then he stopped and looked at Talen more closely. "Is that blood? What happened to your face?"

Talen poured out everything that had happened, including his run through the woods. As the story progressed, Da stroked the braids of his beard with increasing anger.

When Talen finished, Da set his scythe aside and stood.

"Are you going?"

"It appears I am," said Da.

"Should we bring our bows?" asked Talen. "Or would billhooks be better?"

"Billhooks?" asked Da.

"In case we're attacked."

Da grunted. "You're going out to glean. We've got a field that needs stacking."

"But the hatchlings," said Talen.

"The hatchlings," said Da. "Son, did you not learn anything from your adventure this morning? Even if the children were Sleth, the greater risk is being mistaken for a Soul-eater by an idiot with hunt fever. We're talking about two children, however ferocious they may be." Da shook his head. "You said a Fir-Noy rider brought the message? That's the problem right there."

"Shouldn't we at least give the warnings some credit until we find out otherwise?"

"Sparrow was a good man," said Da. He heaved a great sigh.

Talen had not known the smith very well. However, he'd always wondered about his name. He'd thought it funny such a mighty man would be named for such a little bird. Talen, Ke, and Nettle were named after noteworthy ancestors. His sister was named so she might be granted all the qualities—the strength, life, purpose—of a River. But Sparrow? Talen had found out that the smith's family had a long line of Sparrows, all named after an actual bird that had saved one of the family's progenitors from drowning. He'd always wanted to hear that tale, but now he wasn't so sure.

A great weariness seemed to descend upon Da. "You could search this whole land. You could search the whole Nine Clans, and not find Sparrow's better."

"But he was Sleth," said Talen.

Da shook his head. "If Sparrow was Sleth, then fish swim in the deep blue sky." He turned to Talen. "Do you still have the peppercorns?"

Talen nodded. He opened the small pouch hanging around his neck that served as his purse, poured out the corns, and handed them over.

Da took them with his large fingers and carefully placed them in his own pouch.

"Get out to the field and help with the stacking," said Da. "I'm going to fetch us some hens and go talk to the bailiff." Da turned and headed for the barn. "By the way, I found your pants wadded up under your bed," he called back. "They're lying on the table."

"I looked under my bed," said Talen.

Da shrugged. "They were there, plain as day."

That was impossible. Talen had moved his bed out. He would have seen them.

Talen turned and went in to the house to get his old pants. These were stained, thanks to the Stag Home idiots, with blood and grass and would take an hour of washing to get them clean. When he came back outside, Da had Iron Boy saddled.

Da's unstrung hunting bow stood in the leather bow bag strapped along Iron Boy's side. He should have been taking his war bow. "I'll be back before dark," Da said. He secured what he called the Hog behind the saddle.

The Hog was an axe with a handle about as thick as four fingers and a shaft as long as Talen's arm. The head was not broad like a timber axe, but short and narrow with a blade at one end and a pick at the other. But it was used for other things. An archer needed a weapon for close work. He needed something for when he exhausted his supply of arrows. The Hog could pierce armor when wielded by a man half Da's size, and Da had killed three Bone Faces last year with it. But he did not reverence it as many men would: most of the time he used it to break up the bee propolis in the hives or to chop kindling.

“If you find any Sleth,” said Da, “be sure to tell them you’re tough and gamey and not at all fit for dinner.” A little bit of a smile softened his grim expression.

“Easy for you to say,” said Talen.

“We’re going to be fine, Talen,” he said. “Don’t worry about a thing.” He picked up the reins and led Iron Boy away.

Talen watched him go. Then he looked at the woods and swallowed.

5

THE HUNT

On the day before Talen took his beating, Barg, the harvest master and butcher of the village of Plum, stood in the crisp light of early morning with a number of men, waiting to murder the smith, his wife, and their two children.

Oh, none of them called it murder, but all knew that's where this would lead. And what choice did they have?

The villagers had been joined by others in the district and divided into groups positioned around the smith's. One group hid behind the miller's. Another, the one led by Barg, kept itself behind Galson's barn. The third waited in a small grove on the outskirts of the village.

The men with Barg stood for an hour, checking the buckles of what armor they had, wrestling with the shock of the matter, and waiting for the signal in silence. At first, a handful of the outsiders had boasted of what they'd do. "Mark me," a Mokaddian wearing the turquoise of the Vargon clan said. His Vargon accent was plain, rolling his *r*'s much too long. "I will land one of the first five strokes."

Barg cut off a handful of his hair with a knife to show his mourning. "You'll be one of the first five he guts." He grasped another handful of hair and sawed through it.

"What do you know?" the Vargon said.

"I know that today I will help kill a man who saved my life." He cast another clump of shorn hair to the ground. "The smith is a roaring lion. You had best beware."

The Vargon said nothing in return, but what could he say? He was only trying to cover his fears. Sparrow the smith was a formidable warrior, and if the accusations against him were true, then it was certain some of those who had gathered today would die.

The approaching dawn silvered the fields and thatch roofs about the village and set the roosters to crowing. The cattle in the paddocks began to low, a stray dog outside the alewife's barked at a snake trying to get to the tall grass, and down in the south field a few straggling deer decided it was now time to leave the fields and find cover. The men knew their signal was only minutes away.

On the side of the village closest to the forest and the Galson's homes, the smith's daughter, Sugar, stood in the barn feeding their two horses and heard the jingle of a trap bell in her garden. It was followed by the panicked cry of a hare.

Nothing ever got away from one of Sugar's traps. And from the sound of the scuffling and ringing, this creature was big. All that commotion was sure to bring Midnight and Sky, her family's dogs. She'd trained them to leave her game alone, but these two liked to bend the rules whenever they could. So Sugar put down the hay fork, and told Fancy, their mare, and Sot, their draft horse she'd return later. Then she picked up her smothering sack and stepped out of the barn and into the yard in her bare feet.

The village homes looked like fat ships floating amidst a sea of grain. But it was not a quiet sea. Da had flung both doors to the smithy open and stood at the forge hammering away at his work. Farmer Galson's cattle bellowed. They were the noisiest bunch of cattle in the whole district. Sugar saw them bunched up at the far end of their paddock, waiting for one of Galson's grandsons to open the gate so they could go to the watering pond. But that was odd . . . someone should have led them out long ago.

Beyond the paddock gate stood the thatch-roofed homes for Farmer Galson, his children, and his adult grandchildren. Almost a village all by itself. The soft yellow light of hearth fires still shone in many of the windows. Outside, one of the wives made her way back from the privy in a pale nightgown. She held a wailing babe on her hip.

The woman looked up, and Sugar waved across the field at her, but she did not wave back; instead, she dashed for her house. Maybe she hadn't seen Sugar. But then again, maybe she had. Some of the Galsons thought they rode a lord's high horse.

Sugar walked to the garden, opened the gate, and stepped under the arch of climbing rose. The lemony scent from its pink blooms lay heavy in the air. She walked along the shadowed rows of vegetables until she came to the peas and salad greens.

There she found a large hare, a black-tail that was going to make a fine breakfast.

It was easiest just to brain them with a stout stick, but she didn't want to chance ruining the fur about the throat, so she readied the smothering sack and approached the animal. This part of the garden was still wet with yesterday's watering and the soil stuck to the bottoms of her bare feet.

When she got close, the hare began to kick in earnest. It was a monster. Twelve pounds at least.

She threw the sack over it to protect her from its kicking and clawing and quickly held its hind- and forequarters in place. It cried out in distress, but she kneeled on its side, pressing the air out of its lungs. She pressed until she knew she'd start breaking its ribs, then waited for it to suffocate.

The giant hare struggled underneath her. It bucked once more then lay very still. Sugar removed the snare noose from its leg. The hare felt dead. But she'd been tricked before. A number of years ago, before her moon-cycles had come upon her, she'd picked up a hare and carried it into the house and laid it on the cutting stone. The whole time it had lain in her hands like a limp rag, but the second she began to cut, it jumped up and knocked the knife right out of her hand. Then it flew off the table and bolted out the open door. And so she continued to press this hare.

Across the paddocks the Galsons' dogs began to bark. They were joined by another group down by the miller's.

The dogs would often bark this way when travelers passed through. Sugar looked up to see what was causing the commotion and saw a wide line of men on the far side of Galson's paddocks.

The Mokaddians marched in battle order with bows and spears, their helmets gleaming in the early morning light. Those with spears also carried shields painted with a grotesque boar's head circled by a ring of orange. It was the mark of the Fir-Noy clan.

It was not uncommon to see such things. All men, Mokaddian and Koramite, were required to regularly attend their clan musters. But something about this was not right.

She turned and saw another line coming up from the miller's.

Then she realized: these men were converging, but not on the practice field. No, they seemed on a direct course for her house.

6

KING'S COLLAR

Fear ran up Sugar's back. Not only were these men converging, but none of them wore the armbands that distinguished friend from foe during the practice musters.

Sugar stood, trying to get a better view.

The hare that had lain beneath her bucked free of the smothering sack. It bolted down the row of peas, pushed through a hole she'd missed in their fence, and fled to the short hedgerow that grew along a portion of Galson's paddock.

The men marched toward the house. She could see the intricate Mokaddian tattoos around their wrists and forearms. She could see beards and naked chins under their helmets, but they were too far away for their eyes to be anything but dark pits.

She ran to the back door and flung it open.

Mother bent at the hearth building up a cooking fire. She startled when Sugar rushed in. "Goh, you do that just to set my heart leaping in my throat, don't you."

"There are men dressed for battle in Galson's field," said Sugar. "Others down by the miller's. Was there a muster today?"

Mother picked up the bowl the potter had thrown just for Cotton, Sugar's infant brother who had been stolen the previous season. "I'm sure I would have heard something."

At that moment Da opened the front door. As the days turned hotter, Da had taken to wearing as little as possible. He stood there bare-chested with the morning at his back.

"Purity," he said to Mother, "this beard is going to be the death of me. I'm sick of the braids catching fire. I'm not going back to the smithy until it's shaved off."

Sugar saw that two of his braids were indeed singed.

"Ach," Mother said, undoing the shutter latch, "they're so handsome on you. Half the men in this village would give a finger for such a beard."

“I don’t want their fingers,” said Da. “They can have the beard for free.” His massive back and arms glistened with the morning sweat. He smelled like charcoal smoke.

Mother walked to the back door and looked outside. “That’s odd,” she said.

Da spoke to Sugar. “I heard the hare trap. All this time I’ve been lusting after beef. Why can’t you catch one of Galson’s steers? I’d even settle for one of the old ones.”

“There’s the matter of Farmer Galson,” said Sugar.

“Bah,” said Da, dismissing the farmer. “Make a trap for Galson as well.”

“Sparrow,” said Mother, “did you forget today’s muster?”

“None that I know of.” He walked over to her, but instead of looking out the doorway, he reached out with one of his massive arms and grabbed her around the waist. He nuzzled into her side and began nibbling.

“Stop,” she said and pushed at him. “Sparrow, what are those men doing?”

Da looked outside.

Midnight and Sky began barking out front. Sugar looked through the front door Da had left open. “There’s another group coming down the lane.”

As Koramites, Sugar’s family had no legal clan. The Mokaddian and Koramite fatherlands were far across the sea. The Mokaddians had beat the Koramites there in a great war not long ago, and one of the Mokaddian prizes had been the Koramite settlements in the New Lands. Of the nine Mokaddian clans that came to claim the prize, the Fir-Noy seemed to hate their Koramite vassals the most. Not two months ago a group of Fir-Noy had beat a Koramite woman until they’d ruined one eye and half her teeth.

But Da had said that wouldn’t happen here. Those were upland Fir-Noy that had beaten the woman. They didn’t have sway in the village of Plum, and Da had the assurances of the territory lord on that.

“They’re surrounding us,” Sugar said. The men were close enough for Sugar to see the set of their mouths—bitter as garden rue.

When Sugar was a child, a gang of four village boys had tormented her until Da confronted the boy’s parents. But that didn’t end the issue. So Da took it to the village council. He demanded the boys come fight her one-on-one. Mother was furious, taking him to task for making Sugar fight his battles. But Da stood his ground.

Da himself was a fighter, and for one week he sparred with Sugar, preparing her as best he could. Then the boys had come, some grinning, some all business. They brought most of the village with them. And in the wedge field, surrounded by grandmothers, children, and dogs, Sugar had taken a beating. But the boys had not left unscathed either. There was a black eye, a bloody nose. She’d kicked one so hard in the gut that he’d vomited in the grass.

Afterwards, some of the villagers cheered for her. A few of the fathers of the

boys who had started it all came and made peace. Da was satisfied. Mother was not. She would not speak to him for two weeks. But even with her heavy fury on him, Da did not give up on Sugar's lessons. "There are those who act," he said. "And those who are acted upon. I'm not ever going to leave you in a position again where you have no choice."

Two years later when her moon-cycles came, Mother convinced Da he was ruining her chances of a good marriage, for what boy wanted to bed a bruiser? So he stopped teaching her how to use her feet and hands as weapons, and began to teach her knives.

That was a number of years ago. She'd never had to use the knife Da forged for her protection and made her wear. Not to draw a man's blood. Although she had let a few of the boys she'd been introduced to at Koramtown know she wore it. But mostly she'd used the knife around the yard in her chores. Now, even though she knew it would be useless against a host of men, she was glad she had it.

Mother turned to her. "Get Fancy saddled."

Sugar moved to obey, but Da held his hand up. "No. Running will only raise their suspicions or prod them to act. This might be nothing. Leave it to me. I know how to handle these men."

"And then it will be too late," said Mother.

"Woman," said Da in warning. Then he walked out the front door.

When he was only a few paces into the yard, Mother turned to Sugar. "You get Fancy."

"Do you want saddlebags?" asked Sugar.

"All I want is a horse. The Fir-Noy are not what they once were."

Sugar dashed out the back door.

The troops in Farmer Galson's fields had fanned out and were now walking as a line toward the house.

Legs, her younger, blind brother, stood in front of the chicken house, his head cocked at an odd angle as if looking off into space, which was what he did when he paid fierce attention to every sound and smell. His wild hair stood up. In his arm he held a basket of onions and eggs.

"Legs!" she said. "Get in here."

"I can hear men," he said.

"Move!" she said.

Holding the eggs to the bottom of the basket, Legs jogged for the back door. He needed no stick to navigate the house and yard. If he knew a place, he could walk about as if he were sighted. It was only when he was in a new place that he might stumble, or when things were lying out of place. And so they all had learned to be very tidy.

Sugar ran to the barn. Fancy nickered. Sot had already moved out to the watering

trough. Sugar grabbed the harness, slipped it over Fancy's head, and fitted the bridle in her mouth. Then she led the horse out and tied her to the post by the back door.

The Fir-Noy stood with their hideous shields only a few paces beyond the chicken house. They'd formed up into a loose circle that ringed both the house and smithy. "Mark the horse," one of the soldiers said.

For a moment Sugar thought they were going to shoot Fancy right there. Perhaps shoot Sugar herself. She rushed into the house and shut the door behind her. She went to her mother who stood in the doorway to the front yard.

"Fancy's not going to be enough," she said.

Mother gaze was fixed on Da out in the yard, but she reached out and smoothed Sugar's hair. "You did just fine. Now, if anything happens, you and Legs need to be ready to ride. You'll have the most cover in the woods. So it's straight through Galson's fields, low on Fancy's neck. And if someone stands in your way, you ride them down."

Fear seized Sugar's heart. Had it really come to this? "What about you and Da?" "You ride them down," said Mother. "You flee to Horse."

Mother had always told her that if the Mokaddians ever attacked, she was to flee into the Shoka lands and find the farmer many called Horse. His given name was Hogan. And that's how she addressed him out of respect. Sugar didn't know him well, but she had been to his farm a few times. Still, how would she ride through that ring of men? They'd fill her or Fancy full of arrows before she'd galloped a rod.

"Do you hear me?" asked Mother.

"Yes," Sugar said.

She looked past Da at the soldiers out front. They'd stopped a number of paces from Da. Those with bows had strung them, and that was something fearful. Because keeping a bow strung all the time only ruined the weapon. You never strung your bow unless you were going to use it.

Midnight and Sky barked at the men until Da whistled sharply and called them back to his side.

Two men on horseback faced Da. She recognized the leader and the orange and blue patterns painted onto his armor. It was the territory lord, a man everyone called the Crab for his ruddy complexion. Next to him sat the district lord. Behind them stood Barg, the butcher and village harvest master, holding his spear.

Da bowed to the Crab. "My Lord," he joked, "have you at last come to wrestle your humble servant?"

But the Crab did not smile. "Sparrow, smith of Plum," he said. "You have been accused of dark magic. We are here to take you and yours to prove that you are whole and without spot."

Dark magic? Sugar did not believe she'd heard him correctly.

"What?" said Da.

“If you’re clean,” said the Crab, “you need not fear the ordeal.”

An ordeal was designed to flush out Sleth. Supposedly, when such a creature was on the point of death or overwhelming pain, through drowning or torture, it would multiply its strength with its dark magic to save itself and thus reveal its true nature.

But how anyone could think her family was among such was impossible to fathom.

The Crab reached into a pouch tied to the front of his saddle and pulled out a thin collar, almost a necklace.

“I have here a king’s collar. I want you to put it on.” He tossed it. The collar shimmered in the early morning light; it landed in the dust two-thirds of the way between the Crab and Da. “When it’s about your neck, you will bind your wife and children in chains.”

He motioned to a man behind him who brought up a number of leg and neck irons and tossed them toward where the collar lay.

A king’s collar was a magical thing, wrought by a special order of Divines called Kains; it not only prevented a person from working magic, but it weakened them and made them easy to handle.

Sugar realized the men did not come closer and bind the family themselves because they feared some kind of evil trick.

“This is ridiculous,” said Da.

The Crab’s horse danced to the side a few steps.

Then the district lord tossed a large sack towards Da. It landed heavily on the ground. “The contents of that sack were found last evening on the bank of the Green by a group of mothers and children doing their laundry. Open it.”

Da walked over to the sack, squatted down, and pulled the mouth open.

“Whose child is that in the sack, Master Sparrow?”

Sugar heard her mother take in a sharp breath.

Da hesitated for a moment then gently worked the body out. He knelt there for quite some time, not moving, not saying a word.

Then Sugar knew who was in that sack. She could feel it from the crown of her head to her toes. Her fear fled and she raced out the door.

Da turned and motioned for her to stay. “Get back!”

But it was too late. Sugar saw the baby that Da had exposed.

It was Cotton, her little brother. She knew it. Little Cotton, stolen out of his crib earlier this spring. By woodikin or slavers or wild dogs, nobody knew. Yet here he was.

She came closer and saw that the body was bloated and partially decomposed. It had the lighter Koramite coloring and Cotton’s curly hair.

Cotton, their bonny little honey man.

Then Da opened the sack wider and slid the body of a stork out.

From the uncommon kidney-shaped spot of dark feathers on its shoulder she knew it was Lanky, the young stork with a wounded wing that she and Legs had found. They'd wrapped him up in Legs's tunic and brought him home, careful to avoid the sharp yellow beak. Mother had nursed him back to health. And when Cotton was born, it seemed to think he was its brother. Mother was always shooing it away from him for fear of that long beak. And the stork would go, but only to perch on a fence post or the limb of one of the trees. It pestered them for weeks.

Lanky had disappeared the same day Cotton did.

Sugar had thought the mad bird had finally departed because Cotton had gone. But this was awful. Somebody had taken both and killed them.

Da turned the bird over. Something was wrong with the carcass. She looked closer.

The bird had wings and feathers. But where the talons of the right leg should have been, a misshapen human foot curled. And where short feathers should have graced the beast's head, patches of long blond hair grew. And underneath that hair lay what surely was a small, twisted, but human-shaped ear.

Sugar's sickness turned to revulsion.

"Look closely at the foot of the child," said the Crab. "Notice the nails. Notice also the few patches on its back. That's not matted hair; it's the beginnings of chick down."

Da stood, horrified.

"And now," said the Crab, "you will put on the collar and chains."

"Sugar," Mother called.

But Sugar was rooted to the spot.

Da found his voice. "You think we are soul-eaters? You think we would spend our child's soul like this?"

"What I know," said the district lord, "is that someone buried these two. And when the recent floods came, the waters opened the grave, tasted its contents, and spat them out."

"My Cotton was stolen," said Mother.

"Yes, yes," said the Crab. "Snatched by one of the woodikin and taken to the swamps or into the wild wood over the mountains. It's a fine story, but here he is."

It was common enough for the Divines of the many glorydoms to draw the Fire that fueled the days of a man's life. But not the soul. Never the soul. Sleth, on the other hand, stole Fire *and* soul from men and beasts. The singular nature of the soul was what gave each type of living being its distinct attributes. Consuming bits of another's soul transferred random aspects of that soul, aspects that manifested themselves in mind and body, slowly twisting the one that had consumed it.

Sleth stole from humans, but because animals couldn't tell their secrets, Sleth stole most often from them. So if one had stolen Fire from his goat, then he would also have traces of that goat soul in the draw, and over time that soul would manifest itself. Such a thief might develop the nubs of horns on his head or a slit iris in his eyes. If one had stolen from fish, he might one day find patches of scales instead of skin. Someone who stole from his cattle might be inflamed with lust by a heifer in estrus. Someone who had stolen from a bird . . .

But this was all wrong. How could a babe steal soul?

"You cannot controvert the manifestations of Sleth-work upon both bodies," said the Crab. "Nor can you claim the child is not yours. The other Koramite children who died last season have all been dug up and accounted for. And no other has gone missing."

The bowmen trained their arrows on Da's heart. Some pointed their arrows at her and Mother.

Barg spoke up. "You haven't been sick in many years. And the tale your wife tells is suspect. Your dogs were in the yard the day your child went missing. This she swears. Yet she also said they did not bark." He motioned at Midnight and Sky. "We all heard today how they react to strangers. There could have been some charm put upon them. But it could also be the one snag in an otherwise well-spun lie."

"Purity does not lie," said Da.

"Then you have nothing to fear from the ordeal," said the Crab.

"My Lord," said Da. "I respect your office. But you are no Divine. An ordeal—"

"Master Sparrow," said the Crab. "Would you rather I let a mob deal with the problem? This is what prudence demands. Now, pick up the collar."

"There's not one of you that can revive us if the ordeal turns fatal. Let us wait for a Divine."

"That is not an option."

Of course, it was. But they thought Da was Sleth, and everyone knew you did not bargain with Sleth. You never gave them any quarter. Sleth were both fearsome and wily and too quick to escape their bonds.

"You live with me all these years and suddenly conclude I'm one who could devour his own children?" Da pointed at Barg. "Who was it last autumn, after those bloody battles on the Fingers, that cast aside prudence and rowed back at night to an island crawling with Bone Faces to save three doomed friends?" It had been Da who had rowed back. Da who had saved, among others, Barg the butcher.

Sugar looked into the faces of the soldiers. There were a number she recognized. Some had laughed with Da in the yard. Others had eaten at their table. Many of the villagers of Plum had drunk ale and been entertained by Legs singing his ditties. All had accepted the water he drew and delivered to the villagers as they

worked the fields, him leading his goat and cart, feeling the road as he went with his stick. But those smiling faces were gone. They were replaced by faces grim and fixed on their purpose.

Mother grabbed her arm and pulled her back toward the house.

“I’ve drunk and danced with you,” said Da. “I’ve shod your horses. I probably fashioned most of those spearheads. You’ve nothing to fear from me. My heart is as clean and fresh as well water and you all know it.”

“What we know is that all the evidence points here,” said the Crab. “And now we’ve come to the end of our discussion. If we were uplanders bent on murder, you would already be dead. I’ve done more than give you the benefit of the doubt. This is the last chance I’m giving you. Pick up the collar and irons.”

“You will kill us and learn nothing.”

“Zun,” said Barg, using the title of honor meant for warriors who were equals. “Just pick up the cursed irons.”

Da did not move.

“Bowmen,” said the Crab. “Ready yourselves.”

The bowmen drew their strings to their cheeks.

Sugar could not believe her eyes.

She and Mother now stood at the doorway to the house.

Da looked back at Mother. Some communication passed between them that Sugar could not decipher.

The Crab raised his arm to signal the bowmen. “Let all here witness that Sparrow, smith of the village of Plum, has refused an ordeal.”

“Stop!” said Da. “I’ll take your wretched collar and irons. But you know only Divines can conduct hunts. The only reason you haven’t killed us already is so that you can avoid the fines levied on mobs like this. Let it be known that on this day the laws of the Glory of Mokad have been set aside. Your blatant disobedience will be made known. And your own Divines will come to collect the debt of blood.”

The Divines would come. And they would punish these men, for the laws on this matter were clear and ruthlessly enforced: no man could take upon himself even the slightest part of the honor of a Divine. But the Divines would come too late.

Da walked forward and picked up the collar and irons.

They would almost surely use water for the ordeal. And Sugar’s family would drown. She’d once touched the cold, bloated body of a boy who had drowned. She envisioned Legs as that boy, and panic ran through her.

Da examined the irons and said, “It looks like your smithing is as bad as your judgment. I’ll need a hammer to assemble these pieces properly.”

“Those pieces are just fine,” said the district lord.

Mother turned to Legs and in a quiet voice said, “Get the shutters. Slowly now.”

Da began walking toward Mother and the open doorway.

Legs closed the shutters on the front of the house then moved to the back.

The district lord called out, "Stop!"

Da stopped only a few paces from the front step and looked back.

"Put on the collar," said the district lord.

"Of course," said Da. He dropped the irons in the grass. And then he dashed toward the house.

At that moment Mother moved back from the door and pulled Sugar in with her.

A cry of alarm rose from the soldiers.

"Shoot him!" commanded the Crab. "Shoot!"

THE COURAGE OF WOMEN

At the moment of the Crab's command, the bowmen released their arrows, and Sugar saw the arrows fly.

Da took three, four strides. He leapt to the porch. Then an arrow struck him in the back below the ribs. Another flew like an angry insect into the house above her head and struck the wall behind her.

"Sparrow!" Mother called.

Da's momentum carried him into the house, and Mother slammed the door shut.

More arrows struck the door. A man cried out, "I got him! I got him!"

Midnight and Sky had not followed Da. They barked viciously outside.

Mother pulled the crossbar on the door in place.

More bows thrummed outside and the dogs' barks turned to screams. Then the dogs fell silent.

Da winced and looked down at his side. The arrow had not gone into the thick of his back, only cut the flesh on the side. But the blood still spilled from him like water. He pressed his hand to the wound.

"Those cursed blackhearts," he said. He pulled his hand away wet with blood. "Get me a wrap," he said to Mother. "All these years, and then they treat me like some feral dog."

Mother took a knife to her dress and cut a long strip. "We should have ridden when I first suggested it. Why you can't listen to me I'll never know."

"Well, you won't have to fret about that much longer, will you?"

Mother was furious. She made the final cut, then came and tied it around Da to cover and hold the wound. When Da took his hand away it was dark red. Heavy drops of blood fell to the floor.

"Did you get your mother's horse?" Da asked Sugar.

“I did,” she said, and the enormity of that almost overwhelmed her. One horse was not enough for all four of them. She cursed herself for not having thought to get Sot.

Da nodded. “It’s enough.”

From outside, they heard the Crab yelling at his men. “I want all here to witness that Sparrow has refused the proving. Fire the smithy and the house.”

Moments later Sugar heard arrows snake into the thatch above their heads. Those would have their points wrapped and burning with pitch-soaked rags.

“Fetch me my armor,” said Da.

“What are we going to do?” asked Sugar.

Da looked down into her eyes. “You, my dear, along with Mother and Legs, are going to ride Fancy out of here.”

“You fool,” said Mother. “It’s too late for that.”

Sugar thought Mother had said that in anger, but when Sugar looked up, she could see Mother was not angry—she was wracked with grief.

“I’m going to draw them away from the back,” said Da. Then he took Mother’s hand and kissed it. “It’s not too late. Not for a fool to remedy his foolishness. You three will ride away, and not look back.”

“I don’t want to ride away,” said Sugar. “Besides, where can we go that they won’t find us?”

“Mother will know,” said Da. “Now fetch me my tunic.”

Sugar hesitated, but Mother nodded, so she ran and brought the quilted undertunic and helped Da tie it shut. Then Mother dressed him into the mail tunic that extended down to his thighs.

Da couldn’t rout so many men. They were all going to die, yet Da made her cinch the buckles on his breastplate as if he were dressing for a parade.

Legs found his way over and grasped Da’s wrist. His hair stuck out, and fear shone plainly on his face. Da took Legs’s hand and kissed it. “Be brave, Shen, son of Sparrow, son of Sparrow, son of Shen.” Shen was Legs’s given name. He was an ancestor who had been a powerful man, and Da loved telling his stories. Da kissed Legs’s hand a second time.

By the time they had the breastplate buckled about him, Sugar could hear the fire above their heads and smell the smoke coming in through the cracks of the shutters.

“Peer out the back and tell me what you can see,” said Mother.

Sugar looked out a small hole in the shutter and surveyed their garden. Fancy neighed nervously and clopped about trying to pull free from the post. The soldiers stood away from the border of the yard.

“They’ve backed up,” she said.

“Did you see their faces?” asked Da. “Half of them are petrified. Those are not children out there. I should be stuck like a pincushion with arrows. But their fear has affected their aim. Would that I were a soul-eater. Then this whole so-called hunt would be at risk. With average luck, I’d kill the lot of them and green our garden with their blood.”

Mother came away from the window. “Perhaps we can make the break together,” she said to Da. “You can take off this armor. The children and I will ride off first. And in the confusion of them chasing us, you can get on Sot.”

Da fastened his helmet on. “It’s too risky. We need to split them. I should have run to the smithy to draw them away from you, but none of the pieces there would have fit me well. There’s no armor there but what’s made for these short whoreson Mokaddians.”

Heat began to press down upon them as if they were loaves in an oven. Smoke hung about the room in hazy streaks.

“It’s time,” he said. Then he took Legs’s face in his hands and kissed his cheek, embraced him, then kissed him again. He did the same to Sugar, but she could not let him go.

She would not. Lords, she would rather die with him. She had her knife.

“You are a delight and solace,” he said. “We named you perfectly. Take care of your brother.” Then he gently forced Sugar away.

He stood and looked at Mother with a fierce light in his eyes. “I could never have found a better woman,” he said. “Even in your arguing.”

“Take off the armor,” Mother said.

“We’re not going to be able to make the break together,” said Da. “It won’t work.”

Mother seemed oddly calm. “Sparrow, my heart. Haven’t you learned yet that I’m always right?”

What was Mother thinking? Then Sugar realized she had given up. She’d always said that if her babies died, she wanted to go with them. Sugar saw this logic extended to Da as well. And perhaps that was right. They would all die together.

“No,” said Da. “We’ll not take that route. We’ll not walk into their spears and arrows without a struggle. If they want my blood and the blood of my fine wife and children, then they will pay for it. You’re feeling battle dread; hold your course until it passes. You have a chance, Purity. A slim one. Don’t throw it away.”

“I’m not talking of giving up,” said Mother. “We do have a chance, but not in this way. They’ll cut you down before those out back even know what’s happening. You’re a mighty man, Master Sparrow, but even you cannot stand against fifty spears.”

Da’s face was full of confusion. “What better plan is there?”

“I will face them.”

Da's face softened. "That, love, is my task. Now ready yourself." He turned, but Mother grasped him by the shoulder and held him back.

She had gone mad with panic and grief.

Da tried to pull her hand away.

"I will face them," she said calmly.

"Purity," he said. "Love." He removed her hands and tried to stride to the door, but Mother grasped him again.

"No," he said and removed her hand. But she took him by the rim of his breastplate and, like a man heaving a sack of meal, threw him across the room. He stumbled over a chair and slammed into the far wall.

Many men came far and wide to wrestle Da. Few had thrown him. None had handled him with such force.

Da looked at Mother, his face full of shock. He shifted his mail tunic, then tried again to reach the door. But Mother planted herself in his path. He tried to push her out of the way, but could not budge her. He renewed his efforts, his arms and neck straining. But it was to no avail.

His expression turned from shock to angry determination.

He took a step back and then lunged at her, but Mother simply stepped out of his way and with one sweep of her foot took his legs out from underneath him.

Mother reached down to take his war maul. "I will face them," she said calmly. "Take off your armor so you can ride more easily."

Da grasped the head of the maul. "Purity," he said.

"I will draw them to me," she said. "And you will ride with the children. It will be best that way. They will not be orphaned or caught and sold as chattel. You can provide for and protect them as I never could."

"I don't understand," Da said.

"Yes, you do," she said, then she tugged the maul out of his grip.

Sugar stood back, confused and alarmed.

Mother turned to her. "The way to the woods will be clear. Be ready to fly."

Then she walked to the front door and put her hand on the crossbar. She paused, taking them all in with her gaze. "I will be waiting for you in brightness."

She lifted the bar, and in one fluid motion she flung open the door and raced outside. Clouds of smoke billowed in. The roar of the fire above them surged. Out back, Fancy cried with wild panic.

Luckily, neither Sugar nor Legs were standing anywhere within the line of sight from the doorway, for moments later more than a dozen arrows hissed through the smoke, some sticking into the walls, others glancing off a table or chair. Da had only just gained his feet when two struck him. One glanced off his breastplate, the other hit him in the mail over his thigh. He grunted at the second, but it did not have an armor-piercing head, and the arrow fell away.

Da stood and raced after Mother, but halted at the door. He coughed at the smoke and squatted to get under it. "Goh," he said with a look of wonder on his face.

"Da," said Sugar and rushed to shut the door. But as she grabbed the door, she saw what Da was looking at.

Mother had already reached the soldiers. Two men lay on the grass. One was dead. The other screamed out at the wound that had nearly taken his leg.

She moved like a snake, like the wind. She was graceful and absolutely horrible.

She swung into another man's wooden shield and sent it flying. He cried out and stumbled backward, but before he could reach the ground, she smashed in the side of his head.

Sugar could not believe her eyes. She would not. Such speed and power was unnatural.

"Purity," said Da, and Sugar could see the horror and disbelief on his face.

The great bulk of the men were falling back, some stumbling over one another. In his retreat, one of the bowmen loosed an arrow, but it flew wide of Mother and struck one of his fellows. Another man charged her with a spear, but she swung the maul with blinding speed and cleaved the spear into two.

The Crab yelled for his men to stand and close ranks.

Mother was about to put the whole mob on the run, but two men yelled and rushed her from behind, their javelins held high.

"Mother!" Sugar yelled.

Mother turned just as they cast them. She dodged one, but the other caught her in the shoulder and knocked her back.

Da roared.

He had been in shock, but fury now burned in his eyes.

Mother removed the spear and defended herself from the sword blows of the man who had thrown it.

A dozen archers came running round the corner from the back of the house. They began to form a line. Mother would not be able to dodge their arrows.

The flames thundered overhead.

"Get to Fancy," Da commanded, "and ride."

Then he rose and stepped out onto the porch and put his helmet upon his head. Someone shouted out a warning, and the mob turned to look.

Da stood in his dark, shining armor, the fire raging above his head, smoke pouring off the roof.

The men in the yard froze.

"You've met the mistress," Da bellowed. "Now face the master!"

A man dropped his spear, panic shining in his wide eyes.

Da roared and and charged into the fray.

“Da!” Sugar called after him.

He had no weapon, and at first, Sugar thought that he too would fly into the soldiers as Mother had with that awful strength and speed. But Da did not show any sign of dark magic. He charged as a normal man would, an actor playing a role.

But the soldiers did not see through Da’s bluff, and they began to scatter.

Just then the Crab yelled out and galloped across Sugar’s view toward her parents, his sword held high and at the ready.

The house burned like a furnace. The heat began to scorch her lungs with each breath, and she dropped to the floor.

She watched Da run to one of the dead men and pick up his spear. Then he turned just in time to meet the Crab’s charge. Da yelled and shoved the spear into the neck of the Crab’s mount. The horse screamed, reared, and threw its rider.

“Sugar!” Legs called out.

She turned and saw him holding his hand to his chest. His hand was bleeding. She’d been wrong: one of the arrows *had* found a mark.

She could do nothing against soldiers. But she could help her brother.

“Open the door!” she shouted.

“I can’t,” he said.

He could, but was too frightened to do anything. The wisterwife charm he always kept about his neck had fallen out of his tunic. Sugar hoped the wisterwives were indeed looking out for them. But the wisterwives would be able to do nothing if they let the house burn down on top of them. Sugar tore herself from the battle that raged out front and crawled to her brother.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“We’re going to the woods,” said Sugar. “And then . . .” And then she didn’t know where. No, they’d go to Horse.

She opened the door.

Fancy was gone. She looked out through the haze and billows of smoke to the edges of the yard and could see her nowhere. But neither could she see any soldiers. They all must have run to the front of the house to join the battle.

A log above them made a deafening burst.

“Take my hand,” said Sugar. “We’re going to run to the pond, and from there the river. Are you ready?”

There was an immense whoosh, and the heat at Sugar’s back seemed to increase tenfold.

“Now,” she said. And she and Legs bolted from the house. Down the path they went between the barn and the pheasant house.

When Legs knew a course, he only needed to know where he was at any moment and whether any new obstacles lay in the path. He did not count steps or need to feel about him.

They had taken the path to the new pond many times, for Legs loved the feel of the sun-heated water. And so Sugar only needed to call out his orientation points as they came to them. They ran past the garden and privy to Mother's pheasant house.

Three of the soldiers far to her right fled the battle. She looked back, hoping to see that Mother and Da had scattered the small army.

The whole roof of the house raged with fire; the immense flames wheezed and roared dozens of feet into the sky. Beyond the fire, Da and Mother stood side by side. With one hand Mother pressed her wound; in the other she held a sword. Da held an axe and shield.

It appeared they had put the soldiers to flight. But then the soldiers stopped and turned, forming a line. They weren't fleeing, they were making a space so that the bowmen could shoot without killing a number of their own.

Legs tugged on her.

Mother tried to charge the line, but Da stepped in front of her to stand between her and the soldiers.

The bowmen loosed their arrows. These did not fly wide this time, and despite Da shielding her from most of the shafts, Mother fell to the earth.

Da's battle cry sounded over the raging of the fire. He too charged. The arrows did not penetrate his armor, but a multitude of spears did.

A shout of triumph rose up from the mob.

"Sugar?" asked Legs.

The fire blazed into the sky. The heat, even at this distance, burned her face. She could not catch her breath.

The soldiers converged upon Da like a pack of wild dogs.

She watched their weapons rise and fall. Some began to run toward Mother, but the Crab shouted and brandished his sword to keep them away.

It was a nightmare, but Sugar could not tear her eyes from it.

A man raised a black sword high over Da. That was a Fire blade from the temple.

No, she thought. No.

Then the man swung the sword down like he was chopping a mighty block of wood and hacked Da's head from his body.

She could not move. Could barely breathe. The Crab waved the black-bladed man away from Mother. Then a soldier pointed at her and Legs.

"Sugar," said Legs. "Why are we stopped?"

She realized he had been asking her that over and over. His voice seemed to come from a great distance. It seemed she was watching the whole scene from a great distance.

"It's too hot," said Legs and tugged at her.

She took a step; Legs followed. She broke into a jog. "To the woods, straight through Galson's fields." That's what Mother had said.

She glanced back and saw a number of soldiers running toward them.

"Then to the pond," she said, her voice sounding strange to her ears. "Over the fence and to the pond."

Hand in hand, they ran across Galson's paddock. She felt the knife at her waist. The knife Da had given her. A voice in the back of her mind told her to fight. But the voice was small, so very small.

She saw Fancy lying in the grass, arrows sticking from her, but Sugar only noted it. Her mind was filled with the image of Mother and Da and that terrible black blade. Twice Legs stumbled because of her inattention.

When they reached the pond, Sugar looked back. Soldiers ran through Galson's paddocks toward them. On the far edge of a paddock the district lord rode atop his horse looking for a gate through. She snapped back to the task at hand.

Sugar knew the woods well. She'd played hide-and-seek here and foraged for acorns and firewood. She'd hidden here from the village boys before Da taught her how to fight. The wood was old and in many places did not allow enough light to the ground to support much more than mushrooms. But mushrooms would not hide them. And even if they had cover, the mob would bring dogs.

So Sugar decided they would take the forest creek for their path. She and Legs had a small craft there they sometimes floated on. They would ride the water downstream. And just before they reached the confluence with the main river, they would leave the craft and escape into the woods on the other side.

Sugar looked down at the wisterwife charm Legs wore about his neck. Wisterwives were servants of the seven Creators. It was said that even Regret, the Creator who wanted to destroy the world, was served by them, but neither Mother nor Da had ever seen the creature that had left this charm. "Let us hope the wisterwife is watching us," she said.

Sugar looked back one last time to where Da and Mother had fallen. One of the village women bent over Mother, probably stripping her. It flickered through Sugar's mind that this was hopeless. She should stand here and meet her fate. But she quickly pushed that idea aside and faced the woods.

"You've done this a hundred times, brother. It's over the bluff and to the river."

8

PREY

Hunger lay under the towering, fat spruce that grew in his glade and felt some small thing, a very small thing, scratching about the grass on his chest. The Mother had said not to devour the men, but she'd never said anything about small things, so he cracked one eye and spied the creature.

It was a . . .

The name floated away.

He grunted.

The names always floated away. His thoughts continually ran from him. Everything fled before his appetite.

Hunger could smell the creature's Fire, its tasty little Fire. Not much, not enough for a meal. But enough to taste.

He watched the creature grasp a stalk of grass on his chest and bend the ragged head of seeds to its mouth.

Before it could take a bite, Hunger snatched the creature up.

The little thing struggled, but in moments Hunger separated it. The Mother had shown him how to do that down in her cave. Fire, soul, and flesh: these three made up all living things, even him with his body of earth and grass. The Mother had shown him what bound the parts all together, and then she'd taught him how to pick and pry until the binding unraveled in his hands. Of course, there were some things he had not yet been able to separate. But the little thing he had in his hands, he knew its secrets.

The tiny body he cast away. The Fire he bolted, increasing the hours of his life, but the soul—the soul he nibbled, oh, so slowly for it was sweet with thought and fear.

Above him a swarm of insects made their comforting click and buzz. Farther up, the tops of the ancient spruce trees moved with a gust of wind. He could smell the Fire in the trees. But their binding resisted him. It was very hard to steal from

trees, and he thought that this must be because they had a hunger greater than his. Why else would they hold it so fiercely?

The wind gusted again, and the scent that it carried made him pause.

Could it be?

He opened his mouth to smell it better.

A stink?

He stretched wide his great maw and felt the scent fill him, felt it pool alongside his tongue and down his throat. He began to tremble in anticipation.

Magic. The stink of human magic.

Mother, he called. *Mother!*

He'd caught the scent before, but each time he followed it the trail had vanished before he could find the source. The Mother had told him that was to be expected. He was still young, still growing into his powers. She'd said she made him to smell and see for her, and so there was no doubt that's what he'd do. It was just a matter of time.

He called again. *It's strong this time, strong like a river.*

Soon words came into his mind: *Yes, and can you smell a human female in it?*

Hunger could.

You are ripening, the Mother said. *You are ready. Find the female who wields the powers. Bring her and her brood to me.*

Will you give me some? he asked.

No, she said.

I'll eat them then, he said. *I'll eat them all.*

You'll bring them to me, and I'll know if you take a bite.

I'll eat them, he said. But he knew he wouldn't.

Hunger wanted to taste their souls. He craved their thoughts. Even the thoughts of a little thing full of fear tasted good. So what must it be like to feed on a human?

But if he did, the Mother would know. And she would hurt him. She would send him to the others who had asked her if they might lick and nibble bits of him.

No, he wouldn't tempt himself. He would find the woman and her brood and carry them back whole.

Hunger stood, dirt falling from him to the ground, and lumbered out of his dark glade toward the source of the scent.

Barg did not want to stand watch around the burning ruin of Sparrow's house. Not in the dark. Not on this night. The hunt had gutted Sparrow, his horses, pigs, fowl, and dogs: every living thing. All of the organs went into the raging fires of the smithy and home, followed shortly thereafter by the chopped parts of the various carcasses.

Normally, a criminal's flesh would be left to the vultures and foxes and beasts of the woods. And if no beast would touch it, there were always plenty of maggots. But the hunt dared not leave Sparrow to such a fate. No trace of him could remain. His bones, if any survived the fire, would be scattered on the sea.

They'd obtained a Fire sword from the temple in Whitecliff and used it on Sparrow and his beasts. And that gave them some comfort because a Fire sword, forged by the Kains, severed more than flesh. But they had no Seeker, no Divine with the powers to hunt Sleth, to confirm that the soul had fled, and the soul of such a man would be full of wrath. It would linger about. It might even try to possess and ride some weakened man or beast in an effort to exact vengeance. No, Barg did not want to go out. But some things had to be done.

He got up off the floor in front of his hearth. The cups and stones of a game of transfer lay before him. His daughter had just taken her turn and ruined his next move.

Their censer of godsweed had stopped smoking. So he picked up the tongs and fetched a hot coal from the fire. He put the coal in the censer and blew until the weed began to smoke again.

They'd burned godsweed until the air was thick with it. Burned it in every room as proof against the souls of the dead. Even so, Barg did not feel safe.

They'd done a wicked thing today, killing the smith. Everyone had said he'd fought with the strength of twenty men, but Barg had seen it. He'd been there with his spear, and he knew Sparrow. The smith was clean, may the Six bless him. And that was all the more reason for his soul to seek justice.

The smith's wife, however, she was something else. She'd probably trapped Sparrow, trapped him like a spider. And like a spider, one day she would have eaten him. The clan lord had demanded they keep her alive for questioning. For bait. They placed the king's collar they'd taken from the royal house around her neck, laid her in the back of a wagon, and had taken her away to the healers.

And it was a good thing, for those that were sent to chase the girl and boy had searched past the river, they'd scoured the woods all the way to the swamps. Lords, they'd even used dogs. But they found nothing. It was impossible—a girl and a blind boy! But the hunt had come back before dark, haggard and empty-handed. That right there was evidence the children knew her wicked ways.

No, Barg did not feel safe. But he wasn't a coward. He felt a great welling satisfaction, for when others had run today, he had stood his ground. The Crab had noted it. And he wasn't going to ruin that honor tonight.

Barg looked at his daughter. She grew brighter each day. He was actually trying to win this game and failing.

He turned to his oldest son. "You're going to have to take my place," he said.

“Why should you go?” asked his wife. “Nobody else will be there. Nobody would dare.” She sat at the table braiding the youngest boy’s hair for bed.

“They will,” he said. “They’re counting on me. But I’ll be back soon enough. And I think I know a way to take this whole bloody mess off of your mind. We’ll go fishing tomorrow.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “Fishing?”

He leaned in close, then whispered in her ear so the children couldn’t hear. “Happy plans will put the children at ease.”

She looked down and said nothing.

Barg kissed her gently on the cheek. Then he considered his girl and two boys. The firelight sparkled in their dark eyes. To think they had played with that woman’s hatchlings.

“I’ll be back soon enough,” he assured them. “We’re taking quarter watches is all.” Then he belted on his sword and picked up his spear. Foss, their hunting dog, rose to go with him, and Barg opened the door.

The smoke in the room curled out into the night. Barg pointed at the children. “You do your chores and get to bed and when you wake up in the morning, we’ll be off.”

“To the river or the beach?” asked his oldest.

They loved the beach. It would be a long day, but it would give them something to think about.

“The beach,” he said. “We’ll roast crabs.”

Then he shut the door behind him. He took a long drink of water from the bucket at the well then set off down the path that led to the smith’s ruin, Foss padding along at his side.

He could see the last flames of Sparrow’s house burning at the other end of the field. The fires burned low, but they still cast enough light to silhouette the remains of Sparrow’s barn and outbuildings. The smoke of the fires hung heavily in the air.

Barg glanced back at his house a few times as he walked. The shutters were latched and snug. His wife had barred the door. They would be fine.

As Barg got closer to the flames he could see that something was amiss—nobody was there. There were supposed to be ten men on each watch.

Perhaps they were all bunched up behind the barn.

He rounded the corner of the barn and looked across Sparrow’s yard.

Nothing. His wife had been right. None of the others were here.

The house and smithy had burned down to coals and ashes. Here and there a few fires still burned, but they were small. Much smaller than it appeared from his house. Still, he could feel the heat of the coals. The whole mess still produced a blistering heat.

A small flame rose at the edge of a blackened log close to him only to disappear moments later.

All was silent except for the crackling and popping of the fire. The circle of light did not extend far into the swallowing darkness.

Cowards.

He'd roust them out of bed, every one.

Then he saw someone standing in the shadows at the edge of where the house had stood. The man moved aside a log, kicking up sparks. He reached into the hot coals and pulled something out.

"Ha," Barg called to him. "It's good to see there's more than one stout heart among us."

Foss stopped and began to growl.

Then the man straightened up and turned, and Barg got a look at him in the firelight.

He was taller than anyone Barg had ever seen, but his arms and legs were thicker than they should be. And his face—it was all wrong. He had a mouth that was dark, ragged, and huge. A mouth that seemed to crack his head in two.

This was no man.

A tuft of hair on the creature's arm caught fire. The flame sputtered, flashed, and receded into red and yellow sparks that fell to the ground. Then Barg realized it wasn't hair. It was grass. Patches all along its arm had burned, some of them still full of dull red sparks. A clump of smoldering grass fell from the creature's arm to the ground.

Barg saw what the creature held. It was Sparrow's scorched leg, reduced to bone.

The creature flung Sparrow's leg aside and began to walk toward Barg. The ashes and coals of the smithy stood between them, but the creature did not walk around them. It walked straight into the blistering coals, over a tangle of charcoal logs, and through one of the remaining fires. The long ragged grass about its legs began to burn and smoke, but the creature did not waver or cry out.

Gods, Barg thought. Keep your calm. Keep your calm.

The thing's mouth gaped like a cavern. Its eyes. Lords, where were its eyes? And then he saw them—two pits all askew.

Filthy rot. Filthy, twisted rot. Regret himself had sent this thing.

Barg set himself for a throw. Then he took two steps, yelled, and, with all his might, hurled the spear.

The creature did not flinch or step aside, and the spear buried itself in the creature's chest.

"To arms!" Barg shouted and unsheathed his sword. "We're attacked! To arms! To arms!"

There would be others here shortly. And together they would dispatch this monster. All Barg had to do was keep his courage. Keep it like he'd done this morning and not run away.

The creature strode on as if nothing had happened. It plucked the spear out of its chest like a man plucking straw from his tunic and flung it into the ashes.

Foss surged forward to the edge of the coals, but Barg took a step backward, turned, and fled.

Foss snarled and barked. Then he yelped.

Barg heard the dog's footfalls behind him. He turned and saw Foss, neck stretched out, galloping for his life. Foss caught Barg up and sped past.

And behind, the creature loped after them, a thin line of fire burning up one of its sides.

Barg realized he was running the wrong way, away from the other houses and help. But to go back to the houses meant he would run back toward the beast.

Then he saw the door to his house open, the firelight behind, and his wife standing silhouetted in the door.

"No," he yelled. "Go back!" But it was too late and he knew it. The creature would have seen her. Even if he were to change his direction now, the monster might not follow him.

"Get the children!" he yelled as he ran into the yard.

"Barg?" his wife said in alarm. Then her face twisted in horror and she backed into the house.

Barg heard the creature chuff behind him.

He turned around, holding his sword at the ready.

It stood not ten paces away. The fire had risen and burned the creature's shoulder and head.

Courage. All he needed was a bit of courage.

He saw movement in the village. He heard men shouting. But they were running the wrong way, running to the smith's.

"To me!" he cried. "To me!"

The creature opened its mouth wide and drew in a hoarse breath. It turned its head toward the door of the house.

"No, you won't," said Barg. "You filthy abomination, you'll feel my steel first." He let out a yell and, for the second time today, charged, his blade held high.

The creature took a step toward him.

Barg brought his blade down in a cut that would have cleaved a man from collarbone to belly.

But the creature simply grabbed the blade in midswing, reached out with its free, rough hand, and took Barg by the face.

Barg struggled in its stony grasp. And then he was slipping, twisting, falling into another place entirely.

Miles away, Sugar crouched in the moon shadows at the edge of the forest and looked across a river at the farmstead of Hogan the Koramite. The man she knew as Horse.

“Is the water deep?” whispered Legs.

“I don’t know,” said Sugar.

“Do you think he will help?”

“This is where Mother sent us,” said Sugar. But in her heart she knew the chances of him helping them were slim. If Horse harbored them, he put his whole family at risk. But if he delivered them to the hunt, he, even as a Koramite, would earn a fortune.

“I think I’m wicked,” said Legs.

“You’re not wicked,” said Sugar.

“I should have listened to the wisterwife.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sometimes, when I held the charm, she would call to me like I was lost.”

Sugar looked at her brother. She’d never heard of such a thing. “She called to you?”

“In my mind. I could see her. She was beautiful. And sometimes I could see something else with her. Something made of earth, dark and wild and . . .”

Sugar waited while Legs found the words.

“Something in her voice,” he said, “it was horrible and wonderful. Every time I heard her, fear stabbed me because I didn’t want someone to think I was like old Chance. I didn’t want to be mad and taken to the altars for hearing voices in my head. And so I never answered. She said that the fullness of time had come. She promised to make me whole. Promised all sorts of things. Lunatic promises. But I was too scared. I think she wanted to help.”

Sugar thought about the wisterwife charm. All this time they’d thought it was a blessing, a gift. It was an annual ritual for most people to fashion a Creator’s wreath and hang it above their door to draw the blessings of the wisterwives. It was fashioned with rock and leaf, feathers and bones. Many set out a gift of food or cast it upon the waters. But Regret had his servants as well. So who knew what this charm really was? She thought of Mother and her horrible speed, her terrible secrets. That charm could be anything. “You think it was real?”

“I don’t know what to think.” No sound escaped him, but his eyes began to brim with tears, and he ducked his head the way he always did when he was in pain.

Sugar wanted to cry with him, wanted to feel overwhelming grief. But she

was empty, as desolate as rock. And that pained her as much as anything else. What kind of daughter was it that had no tears for the butchering of her parents? What kind of daughter was it that ran? She had a knife. She knew how to use it.

“Da always said you were an uncanny judge of character,” said Sugar. “If your heart tells you to be afraid, then let’s trust it. Da always did.”

Legs leaned into her, and she took him into an embrace, putting his face in her neck and stroking his hair.

Things to act and things to be acted upon. She had a knife. Lords, she’d had at least six, for there were a number in the kitchen. She could have done something. She could have sent Legs to the pheasant house, gone around back herself, and surprised that line of bowmen. She could have distracted a whole group of men. She might have tipped the battle.

Why? Why had she run?

And if she hadn’t run, if, beyond hope, she’d tipped the battle, what then? She’d seen Mother. Seen her horrible power.

Legs gently pulled away. “Will we talk to Horse?”

They had no tools to survive in the wild. Besides, an army of hunters would be combing the outer woods, expecting them to run there. If Horse helped them, and that was a desperate if, then maybe they might be able to survive until all but the most patient hunters gave up dreams of a bounty and went back to their normal labors. If she and Legs survived that long, that’s when they would escape.

“I don’t know,” said Sugar. “Let’s just take this one step at a time. Right now we need to find where they ford this river.”