

CHAPTER

TWENTY

I awoke amid a dream – or at least that was what it felt like. The darkness was as complete as that of sleep. The world around me almost silent. My own breathing, I could hear, and a strange cavernous containment to the sound; not quite an echo, but not the feeling of open air I was used to when waking.

‘Ah, you are awake at last!’

The voice was feather-soft, and thick of accent, but it spoke my mother tongue with confidence.

‘Where am I?’ My own voice was loud, a thunderclap by comparison, and rough with sleep or illness.

‘You are in a safe place.’ Soft. Quiet. ‘You were found in the woods. The cold had seeped into your bones and nearly took you.’

‘It is not cold here.’ I whispered, and yet the sound of it seemed harsh and reptilian in the dark.

‘Ah, yes. The Man of the North. Strong in the face of wind and snow and ice... but there are other types of cold. The damp of the forest and the falling of the rain may not pull

heat from you as quickly as the snows, but pull they do, and steadily. A man cannot bear a long night in the forest, tired and hungry, without the life seeping from his body, sapping strength of limb and mind, until he succumbs, and falls amid the bracken... as you did.’

‘Who are you? How did you come upon me there?’

‘I am Sirrah, but it was not I who found you.’

‘Then who?’

‘Save your questions for now; the answers will only bring more questions and you are tired and worn. Hungry, no doubt.’

‘I thirst.’ As I said it, my stomach grumbled, and the sound filled the place. I heard Sirrah smile – did I *hear* him smile? – and then the rasping of his clothing as he moved. The cool water felt sweet on my lips and tongue, and I felt it slide down to my belly. I gulped it in, let it fill my mouth and stretch my cheeks before each swallow.

‘Less haste, less haste! You will cramp your empty stomach. Here, take some food.’ He handed me something that smelled of vinegar and mushroom, but as I bit into it the taste of beef, or something like it filled my mouth.

‘What meat is this?’ I spoke through half-chewed bites, and again too loud, but he did not seem to mind.

‘It is not. It is a mushroom of sorts, that grows in caves, deep underground. The skin of it is sharp to the tongue, but inside it is hearty and will keep your hunger at bay for a long time, without too much heaviness.’

I nodded into the darkness and finished my meal. Once I had, I felt the weight of my eyelids again and stifled a yawn.

'You must sleep again. You need your rest to heal and grow fully warm again. But I assure you, you are perfectly safe from harm.'

I stretched out on the firm bed again and closed my eyes. There was no fire, but the draft in the air was warm. Sleep began to take me.

'By the way,' Sirrah whispered between the threads of my half-slumber, 'What is your name?'

'Sontar,' I said, feeling the soft-spoken word in my mouth, like honey, 'My name is Sontar.'

And then I slept.

When I next woke, I was still in the same, quiet darkness, and any surprise I felt at it was purely due to finding out that my previous waking had not been a dream.

'Good waking.' I knew the voice was Sirrah's. This time I, too, spoke soft as a mouse.

'What is this place, Sirrah? Are you a hermit?'

'No- well... yes, I suppose some would call me such. But I am far from alone here.'

'Tell me. Do not make me drag out the words.'

'I will tell you what I think sufficient for now. You are healing with marvellous speed, but your leg was cut deep, and your back many times, and much blood was lost. The

cold, too, nearly took you. Nevertheless, wondering can sap a mind as much as anything, so I will tell you some.

'We are in a cave – a complex of caves, really – in the north of the island. Few outsiders come here, and my hosts keep to themselves when they can. Their history is one of persecution and slavery for sport and jest, so they do not trust men like us, as a general rule.'

'I am a prisoner?'

'No, though you are not quite a guest either. You strode nearly onto their threshold and fell on your face. Armed, wounded, muttering in your fever-dreams...'

'My blade!' I reached around me, feeling for the weapon and at the same time feeling the deep weariness in my bones.

'Calm yourself, it is in my keeping. I am not yet to give it to you, but they did not wish you to think it stolen, so they felt you would be more assured were it in the care of one of your own kind.'

'It is here, in the room?'

'In the next.' I could hear the pause and caution in his voice now. 'If you wish to take it back now, by force, you no-doubt could, even in your weakened state. I am older than my voice tells, and no warrior. But I will tell you this: if you kill one of your own kind here – indeed if you kill anyone or any *thing*, you are unlikely to see the sun again, or to live through the following hour.'

I pondered these words.

‘This is no threat, Sontar, but it is where both you and I sit, at present, me from choice and you from necessity of survival. Our hosts are very trusting – trusting to a fault and beyond – but once that trust is broken, their wrath is a terrible thing to see. The aftermath, in this peaceful community, is likewise a deep shame.’

‘Are they men or beasts?’

‘Men *are* beasts, my friend, if I may call you so, but these people are, I believe, descendants of the same men as you and me. They are much changed, through long years of seclusion, but I do believe we are closest kin.’

‘And why are you here, you say “by choice”?’

‘I stumbled upon them, not so unlike you did, many years ago. I am a scholar, and came here in search of legends, only to find a thriving reality hidden here, in the honeycombs of stone.’

‘You intrigue me, with your talk of change and strange living. What do they look like?’

I heard him laugh softly to himself. ‘You know, after so many years here, I wonder how much I, myself have changed.’

The skin on my neck bristled and I felt the tang of something otherworldly in the air. Sirrah must have sensed something too.

‘Be silent.’ A pause. Some flutter of quiet noise. Strange words in Sirrah’s voice, spoken so softly I could barely make out the sounds. A reply. Then nothing.

‘That was one of them...’ I spoke the obvious more out of a need to hear something than to garner a reply.

‘Yes. He is a guardsman. He is a deadly warrior, though soft enough of heart below his vigilance. He wanted to know if you had survived or recovered. I told him you had, in the first instance, and for the most part in the second.’

‘And now what happens?’

‘Soon you will be called for, I expect.’

‘Who will call me? What will I see?’

‘I do not know who will call for you, which leader or healer or gatekeeper may first want to interact, but as for “seeing,” you will see nothing. They do not use lights here, and most never set foot upon the surface anymore. I am allowed a candle, though my neighbours complain of the stink filling the halls and I do not disagree... though for me it is a comfort and reminder of another life, and my former home.’

‘How can you live without light or fire? How to cook, for one thing?!’

‘They cook very little. That meal you ate before, and the one waiting for you now, were taken and prepared without fire. The stones in some places emit great heat, and many meals are warmed there, but it is not what we would call cooking. Springs of water, bubbling with heat and thick with minerals, pour out in some places, and these suffice for hot drink and sometimes for making a kind of stew. They do very well, despite a narrow variety of ingredients at hand. They do not seem to mind that.’

‘And they need light for no other thing?’

‘None that I know of. It is not so strange. Think of a blind man in the outside world. He does not see, but still finds his way, and easily enough through familiar places. Nothing moves here. The furnishings are carved from the living rock, and everything has its given place. They learn them once and they do not change. It is like a community of the blind, perhaps, though their awareness is such that very, very little goes unnoticed or unshared in the darkness of their halls. As we speak, there are no-doubt a dozen curious sets of ears hearing and trying to decipher our words. Our speech, even this subdued whisper, is to them like a shout.’

‘You spin my head with these tales, Sirrah. I know not what to make of them.’

‘Then do not make anything of them at all. Wait. Eat. Rest. We will soon be led where they will to take us.’

I leaned back then and closed my eyes as he brought a bowl of their peculiar mushroom dish and laid it on my belly. I smelled it before it reached me, and heard the movement of his clothing as I had before, but more mindfully this time. I wondered if such jumbled rustlings and currents on the air could ever replace the bright clarity of the sun. I doubted it, but then I had not lived for generations underground. The city dwellers seemed to get all they needed there, and likewise for me in the forests. Each resident gained the wisdom to thrive in each place.

I did not plan to be there long, but as long as I was compelled to do so, I was determined to arm myself with

every advantage I could, shoring up against the unknown dangers that may lie ahead. For the moment, that meant knowledge... and rest.

My meal finished, I closed my eyes, and my thoughts slipped seamlessly into the unfettered wanderings of dreams.

I spent the next week or more, as well as I can tell, lying in the darkness, ears strained against the silence, letting the skin on my thigh and back stitch itself together again and the rest of me gain strength. Many hours, it seemed, I stared out at the darkness, toward the ceiling of stone, until I could feel the weight of the rock suspended above me. Were it to fall, I knew, I would be crushed to a thin layer of moisture in an underground crack, perhaps washed out by seeping rains. Perhaps not. Thus, I drifted from wakefulness to slumber, in and out, without sharp walls to distinguish the one from the other. I do not know how many days I lay awake or how many I slept. In the waking hours I ate and rested and talked with Sirrah some, but little else. I had left the world of lights, and times, and entered something else. A world of sleep, perhaps, and of dreams.

Sirrah woke me, with a gentle touch to my shoulder.

‘It is time.’

I stood and he placed one of my hands on his shoulder and began to walk. I moved along just behind him and a little to the side. I don’t know if it was already the shift

brought on by days in silent darkness, but I felt the disturbed air of our passing suddenly converge on us as we left the room and entered the passage, though there was no light to guide me. I heard the change in our echoes, too – a quickness to them. A sharper tone. I focussed on these sensations and was soon aware of smells around me. I myself was pungent and smelt of sweat and blood, but there were other odours too. Sirrah's breath, smelling of the mushroom stew and heady wine. His sweat I could smell, but also some sharp oil he wore, for medical reasons or vanity I do not know, but it carried the scent of flowers and earth.

And there was something else. It was not a smell, or a sound, or a feeling against my skin... nevertheless I sensed it. We were not alone. Both before and after us there were others, moving in silence along the passage, guiding us and guarding me, no doubt. I cocked my head, but could neither see nor hear anything.

As we walked, I felt the hollow openings to one side or another, come and go. Passages shooting out from either side of the main. Homes maybe. Storerooms. Barracks. I missed the first one or two maybe, but then gained my wits and began to count, one and then another, left side and right, and mapped it in my head. If I could not see with my eyes in this place, then I would use what senses were left to me and paint my own image in my mind's eye. An illusion, perhaps – but my mind already yearned for open spaces, and the self-inflicted trick eased my anxiety.

'We are almost there,' Sirrah breathed, 'Do not speak unless spoken to, and keep your voice to the barest whisper. They will hear you, as will I. They may ask me to translate; I shall do so to the best of my ability, though the languages do not lay one aside the other well... I shall do my best. If they ask anything of you, anything, you should do it. Your life is in their hands. They are perilous hands, but good ones. Remember that. They mean you no harm, but they are a dangerous folk all the same.'

I ducked my head, sensing a low place in the passage, and some rustling sound came from behind me. I felt Sirrah turn and he paused a moment, murmuring something in the same, near-silent tongue. Then he chuckled. Little more than a shuffling in and out of his breath, but I was sure of it. All of this baffled me.

I sensed that whoever – whatever – had been following us, fell back or stopped, and followed us no further. There were still forms in front of us though, and these passed through into an open room, as did Sirrah and I, and then we stopped.

I could feel around me... not eyes, exactly, but something that evoked the very feeling of being watched from a secret place, when the hair bristles on the back of the neck, palms suddenly grow cool with sweat. We were not alone there. Far from it. My mind's eye took in every ethereal hint and painted them together, one upon another, until I saw in my imagination a broad room, high-ceilinged

and regular of shape, with many forms sitting around the edges of the cavern.

Rustling speech from the area several paces in front of us.

Sirrah responded.

Then, with a sound that was no more than a whisper, a voice spoke from the darkness before us, in the tongue that I knew.

‘Welcome, overlander.’

The sound of it made me start, despite the softness of it. I recovered quickly and bowed my head. I thought afterward that I ought to have said something, as we all stood in the darkness, but he seemed to understand, or need no response, and he spoke again.

‘I am the warden of the High Halls. It was my lookouts who found you and brought you in.’

‘My thanks.’

‘You were in need. We provided. Such is right. But I would ask you now, if you mean us harm.’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

‘What brought you here, to the wilds? Are you a scholar, like your kinsman?’

‘No. I was set ashore from a ship. I need to go south, to the port.’

‘Why?’

‘I was to meet a friend there. She may be waiting for me, even now. I am late.’

There was silence then, but in the midst of it I heard the faint rustles of speech, quiet even by their standards, I

suspect. Long moments passed, in which I sensed the occasional shift from those who watched – or guarded – us in the room.

‘Very well. You will go below. The Midwarden will be told and you will be expected. Sirrah, will you go with him?’

‘I will, if you wish.’

‘Your tongue may be needed below, and I am needed here.’

Sirrah nodded in the darkness.

‘Fetch his weapon and give it to him. He is to be armed when they meet.’ With those words, the Highwarden fell silent, and I no longer felt his presence near me.

‘I will be back in a moment,’ Sirrah whispered, ‘Stay still and do not speak.’ He returned almost immediately and pressed the shaft of my scabbard into my hand. ‘Wear this at your waist, but do not draw your sword without leave to do so, or it will be your life at stake.’

I nodded.

We began again to move, Sirrah before me, some shape before him, and another following behind us in the black.

‘Well, my friend, that is good.’

‘What is? I feel as if I am being sent into a deeper dungeon.’

‘Deeper, yes, but no dungeon. Flip your world on its head, Sontar, and take heart. Here we are among soldiers, scouts and guards; below live the citizens. This is a show of trust. Pray be worthy of it. Today we meet those who hold your fate in their hands.’

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Down we went. Steadily. Endlessly it seemed. At a fork in the passage we veered left and then it dove steeply for a while, steep enough that steps would have been more comfortable. But there were no steps. Only depth, darkness, and the increasing heaviness of the stone above. At the bottom of the decline, it flattened out a bit, and we passed an open tunnel on the right, but took no heed of it. I tried to keep my bearings, using the room in which I had been kept as my point of reference, but with the gentle winding back and forth I no longer had any bearing or sense of direction; there was only forward and back. Tunnels. Little tubes of existence in an otherwise solid and impassable world. The tunnel split again, and this time we took the right-hand passage. Side tunnels on the right, left, then right again, and then the feeling of air opened up again, the shuffling of my feet brought fewer echoes to my ears, and I sensed once again a line of people sitting in a large ring around me.

Sirrah slowed to a stop and then, with a gentle pressure on my shoulder, turned me to face at an angle to my left.

Then silence.

I waited, straining ear and focus to find any connection with the dark world around me.

'I have been asked to speak,' Sirrah said suddenly in the silence, 'And to translate the words of our host.'

I stood silent, but nodded.

'I will speak as if from his lips... not my own words. I begin now. You are in the realm of the Tirdathi, and I am Mimek, Midwarden of the Combs. The Midcouncil is also around you. You are welcome here, in as much as you come with no ill intent. Tell us then, what is your intent?'

'I did not intend to come here at all,' I whispered as softly as I could, 'I was passing by, and in need, though I did not think to find any to help me.'

'Our land is not on the road between any two destinations of your kind; how came you to pass this way?'

'Evil men were seeking me, and I was on a ship with friends. I was set ashore to keep them safe in port. I am to meet them, if they are still waiting for me.'

There was a pause then, a near-silence that I had come to know was in fact filled with the rustling speech of their kind.

'If you come in peace, relinquish your weapon.'

There was a pause. Sirrah broke from his translation with a harsh whisper.

‘Choose quickly! Your sword or your blood! They will kill you! It is a moment to obey or to fight!’

My sword was my greatest treasure, but as the command came to me, I remembered the moments after being cast into the sea. I remembered the weight of my money and my precious gear pulling me down through the foamy waves, farther from the life-giving air that was everything to a living creature. Without life, can such treasures have any value at all? It was the first moment of clarity for me, the first realisation that I had always had that most valuable thing in my possession, and no mountain of gold could buy it away or over-value it.

I drew my blade, levelled it before me, then lowered it gently to the stony floor.

Tensions left the room as if the cavern itself exhaled with relief.

‘You did well, my friend,’ Sirrah sighed, ‘Though I myself wondered what you might do.’

‘As did I.’ The voice came not from my own lips, nor Sirrah’s, but from a little farther ahead of me, from the figure who sat in judgment – figuratively and literally – in front of me. I started, and Sirrah breathed out a chuckle.

‘This voice you hear is that of Mimek, the Midwarden. He is familiar with Alturian and a half dozen other tongues of the surface peoples. He’s a scholar, as much as I am if not more, though he fancies himself an artist.’

‘I do not “fancy” myself anything, Sirrah, I am merely what I am. And you, Sontar, have shown the mark of trust, as Sirrah suspected from the first day he spoke with you.’

I struggled with words in that moment, I will admit, so strange was everything around me and so unexpected my situation, but I managed a muttered ‘Thank you,’ and fell silent again.

‘You will do well here, I think. Silence is often the best phrase, as we say.’

‘But,’ I continued, now thrown by his words, ‘If I am trusted may I not go? I need to find my friend. I need to find another friend who is in harm’s way and waits for me.’

There was a pause, pregnant with meaning and perhaps even regret, before Mimek answered.

‘You are not in danger here. We will not harm you. But our land is a secret place, a refuge from evil men who seek us, as yours seek you. Seldom does an outsider come here and then walk abroad again, trusted or otherwise. I do not pronounce your fate, that is for others of higher order, but I cannot let you go.’

I wished at that moment that I had my sword in my hand, that I might bend to the ground and snatch it up for my defence, but better sense took hold of me in time. I would never find my way through that labyrinth of passages, even if I knew which way I had come in. I would have to fight my way through many of these men, or creatures, or whatever they were, and even were I to succeed in slaying them all, would it be only to wander and starve in the

honeycomb of cold stone and corpses? I mastered myself and spoke.

‘Whose decision is it then, my fate?’

‘You will go below. You have seen the Highwarden. I am the Midwarden. If you hope to leave this place one day, it must be by the will of the Lowerwarden; you are to descend and speak to Kirdek.’

‘And does he, too, speak my tongue?’

‘He speaks many tongues, but I fear your dialect is not among them. Sirrah will go with you.’

‘And my sword?’

‘It will go below too, but none go before Kirdek armed, be it our kin or an outsider. He is of the growing people, and does not suffer such things in his presence.’

‘And yet he knows of my danger? The threat on my life if I try to leave?’

‘We, indeed all living things of speech, are the same. There are things, no-doubt, that you would do from a necessity that you do not store in your foremost thoughts, but prefer to keep hidden. Is that not so?’

I did not answer.

‘Sirrah, you will school him in our ways. You will be his ears and tongue to those below. Now, it is time for you to go. I would not have you go in anger. Is there ought I can do for you? A favour I might grant to ease your mind of us?’

I thought hard on this offer. He would not give me my blade back, of that I was sure. They had fed me, I still had

my clothes, and I could discern no use for gold or silver in the caves. It was all darkness to me. Darkness...

‘Yes, there is one thing.’

‘Speak it.’

‘I would see you, your people, with my own eyes. I am blind here, though you seem not to be.’

‘You have mistaken things. It is not that you are blind and we see. We all see, but you have yet to realise it. Still, for now I will grant your wish. Sirrah, do you bear a candle?’

‘Yes, always.’

‘Prepare and strike it then. While you do, those who wish to leave will do so. The rest of us will stay. We will shield our eyes from the glare, but let you look upon our faces when you are able.’

I heard the rustling of Sirrah finding his flint and his candle, and the small ball of fibres he would use to get the flame going, and I also sensed the fleeting movement of something in front of me. I thought it had been a bat at first, but then it dawned on me: behind the cover of Sirrah’s movement, a form had passed not far before me and removed my sword. I could feel its absence again, and only in that did I realise that I had begun to feel its presence, like a friend or brother in arms. I hoped that I would see it again and live to wield it against my enemies under the light of Sun or Moon.

And then the flint struck.

Initially it was as if it had been done directly into my eyes. I flinched backward and had no notion of the reaction

of my hosts, or captors, whichever they were. Then it struck again, and the tiny ball of fibres caught. I could just see, through the tight squint of my eyes, Sirrah's hands tipping the wick of the candle into the flicker of flame until the little thing blackened and rose with a light of its own. Sirrah patted out the fibres and held the candle before him, his finger through a little iron ring attached to a shallow saucer on which the tallow sat. A moment more, with my eyes averted from the bright light, and I could see around me.

I took in a deep breath of air.

The Tirdathi, as they called themselves, were not seated in a ring around me. They all stood, but seeing them made me wonder if I had not been enchanted and grown to the size of a giant. The largest of them were, at full height, eye-level with me if I were kneeling. A few were considerably smaller. Tales told by campfires far in the north came flooding back to my mind, stories of the Mumuts, the little ones who lived in caves and holes like rabbits. But in our tales they were bearded, and rough, and bore great hammers and axes into battle. These people were pale and almost hairless. They wore few articles of clothing, just skirts or loose shirts of plain make. Their heads were shaved or cropped close, and their feet were bare. Several bore weapons, short spears or compact bows in wooden frames – a sort of crossbow I surmised.

Mimek, straining to open his eyes more fully, looked back at me through the glare of the little light.

'Is this what you wished?'

'It is marvellous,' I whispered, 'We have tales of you in the north, but I thought them nothing more than that – just tales to tell children!'

'The telling of tales to children is how all great history is passed. There is no more powerful or lasting record than that.'

'How such tales came to be told in the far north, though, and over the sea... I do not know.'

'You came here. Others from here go to your home, no doubt. Aside from that, are you so sure you do not have Tirdathi in your own land? We know better than to make ourselves known to those who walk uncovered by stone, beneath the sky.'

I merely nodded, my speech taken from me by awe.

'You are satisfied?'

I nodded again.

'Then it is time. Sirrah...'

The candle snuffed out with a puff of air from my friend's mouth, and we were once again plunged into deep darkness, though multicoloured images of the little Mumuts danced and flashed across my vision for many long moments afterward. The smell of candle-smoke hovered in the air and wafted back up the way we had come. There was the now-familiar rustle of speech or footsteps, and we again began to move.

We backtracked to the last split in the tunnel, but instead of taking the route we had taken before, we progressed

down another passageway, this one wider, but lower, and at several points I had to duck my head to prevent it scraping along the top. Sirrah warned of such places, but I had already picked up on some sort of sense of it, in the sound or feel of the air compressing against it and then back upon me.

I said nothing of this to Sirrah or to either of my unseen escorts.

We turned aside, at right angles to the wider passage, and then plunged steeply down, more so than before, to the degree that I held a hand out behind me and almost felt as if shuffling down on my backside might be a more efficient and controlled means of descent. As the tunnel dropped and bent steadily to the side, I began again to lose my sense of direction, I could no longer point with confidence to previous rooms, even had I been asked to do so and offered freedom as a reward for a right answer. All was guessing, once again.

The curve ceased and the left side of the passage opened up into what must have been a room or a chasm. I suspect the former, as I had a keen feeling of eyes upon me; not the idle, curious eyes of onlookers either – these were the appraising eyes of men of war. Small in stature they may be, but our legends of the Mumuts tell of great cunning in combat, though none I knew spoke of them ever going to war. I wondered, if it came to it, how I would fare in this cramped, dark place, even if I had my sword to help me. Would I be able to use it? Not slashing and swinging, for

certain. In large rooms, perhaps... but even then, would I know where the walls were or other obstacles to footing? I could sense it when standing, or walking down a peaceful tunnel, but in the thick of fighting? I doubted it.

My thoughts were disturbed by a scent on the air. Mindful of it, I took in my own sweat and Sirrah's, the lesser scent of limestone and minerals of various kinds, and... water? Yes, water. Even as my sense of smell became sure, a hint of it came to my hearing as well. A murmur, or trickle, echoing down the hall from some dark place ahead. I could hear other sounds, too, from up ahead. These I knew from long experience: the scrape of iron pots, the chalky clunk of stone and clay cups and the splattering music of water emptied from newly rinsed bowls. Our passage bent hard to the left, though, and as we passed a dark opening and left it behind us, the sounds of familiar tasks faded away as well. Those welcome sounds.

A long passage then began, far longer than any of the others had been, and broken only by one large, airy room, in which I felt no new presence and heard no new sound. The portion of the tunnel that came after the room was long and plunged down again, not so steeply as before, but more than made for a comfortable walk. It ended in a kind of serpentine curve near the bottom, and then terminated in a large room, perhaps the largest yet, at which point my escort ceased their walking and I followed suit, standing under mountains of stone, the greater of two giants among people who called this place home.

I wondered if I now had to call it home too. Could I wake each day in the darkness of slumber and not be driven mad? Sirrah had, or so it seemed. He also had fire, and candles, and some place of trust among these people. Even if I had the same comforts, though, my head was one used to the sun on it, my shoulders made for wide labour. And my heart for freedom. This place did not suit me.

‘Kirdek wishes to look upon you.’

Sirrah’s voice startled me from my thoughts.

‘Then let him look.’

‘He will look if he pleases, but I tell you this at his suggestion, because the means by which he will look on you may be... disturbing, perhaps, when first you are seen.’

‘Why?’

‘The means of lighting is unusual, but better suited to their eyes.’

‘Better suited than a candle?’

‘Those above are of a different class than these below. Each has its own purpose. Here in the lower levels, where I live, they make a study of many things. Things that appear naturally, and things that must be conjured from the couches of mystery. The light they will use is of the latter kind.’

‘Magic?’ My skin felt cool, of a sudden, and the hair on my arms bristled.

‘Some would call it so. It is the product of long learning, not of stumbling upon it in some forest, like a lightning-

struck tree. Fire, you think is not magic, because you are familiar with it... but do you know what it is?’

‘Hennubeth’s fire, some call it.’

‘Magic from a god?’

I did not reply.

‘Do not fear this, but be ready for something new... and know that it is not meant to harm you.’

‘How will I-’

Our conversation was cut short by the sudden emergence of a blue-green light from the stone walls around us and the ceiling high above. It at first it only illuminated its own surface, but a moment later it flared brighter until it struck my eyes with a tickling feeling, as if my very eyeballs were vibrating. Forms were blurry at first, but as the moments passed, my eyes relaxed some, and if I allowed myself to stop trying to see, better vision seemed to come unbidden.

I began to make out forms around me, ringed about the hall in the same fashion as those above had done. Here though, they were all of the shorter stature, and all were armed... save two.

On a dais, a little distance ahead of me, sat a small, male Mumut – beside him, robed and with long hair falling in many plaits over her shoulders, was the first female of their kind that I had seen.

Here were the Lord and Lady of the Dark.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

My chest was tight and my fingers twitchy. I hadn't liked being led around in the dark and ignorance, and now that I could see, I faced a man – or whatever the Mumuts called themselves – who would tell me my fate. Part of me regretted dropping the sword, another part of me countered that I still drew breath, and where there is breath, there is hope. The two parts of me battled.

The male Mumut looked at Sirrah and began to speak, using the rustling, whisper-like language I had come to recognise.

'Your host would like me to tell you his name and title, and to get yours. He is Kirdek, Lowerwarden of the Comb. No one in this realm has more earthly authority than he. Your freedom is in his hands. He can cast benefits and glory on you, or chain you in the dark. Anything short of your life, he decides.'

'He cannot kill me?'

'No, only the priests hold that authority.'

'But you said there is no higher than him in earthly matters...'

'True.'

'Well, slaying seems earthly enough to me. He is no king after all, if he cannot order my death.'

'If you do not endanger one of them, they cannot order your death, but this is not a strange thing here. I forget how long I have been in the dark and how different things are above. Let me ask you this: Is snuffing out the mysterious spark of a man more earthly, or more spiritual?'

A sharp hiss broke our side conversation. Kirdek had tired of it and wished us to return to the matter at hand, it seemed. He wore a scowl on his face. Sirrah bowed, and spoke back to him.

'Sontar,' I said, not bothering to whisper it, and the sound of it filled the room. 'It is my name,' I added, 'And should be spoken as I would speak it.'

Sirrah nodded, and shared my words with the warden, adding at the end of it a whispered, 'Sontar.'

The little face turned its big eyes toward me and looked me up and down. Then he shrugged, and dismissed us with a wave of his hand and the snuffing out of the mysterious lights.

'Come,' Sirrah whispered, 'Follow me now. Do not speak until we are alone.'

We moved then through to another hall and then to a set of chambers, each one on alternating sides of the tunnel. We stepped into one and Sirrah hushed me. Then we

waited. At length, I heard the air expel from his lungs and felt his relief, palpable in the air around us.

‘It was close,’ he said.

‘What was?’

Kirdek is not like the wardens of the higher levels. He is a part of the deeper world... more secretive. More cautious. And more deadly.’

‘Was he displeased with me then?’

‘No, on the contrary. But he is fickle with such things and is known to change his mind to perilous results. We got through that unscathed, and so we should be fine.’

‘We?’

‘You are of my kind. I was asked to vouch for you, and I did so. If things go ill with you, I’m afraid, it will not do great things for my standing, to say the least.’

‘I thank you then.’

‘There is no need of thanks, any more than there was choice in the matter – but I accept, nonetheless. We are in it together, now, it seems. We are to stay here and work.’

‘What kind of work?’

‘For me, work on the mind. My usual tasks. For you?’ He patted the bulge of my arm, ‘I suspect something a bit more... earthly.’

He was not wrong.

They came for me after a long sleep in the dark. I followed Sirrah through tunnels I was too groggy to map in my mind, and then arrived at a place where I could hear

churning water. There was speech around me, and then Sirrah chuckled.

‘I was right. They will use your upworlder brawn to best advantage. We are waiting now until they leave, and then your work will begin. It will be burdensome, I fear, and more than a little dangerous.’

‘What am I to do?’

‘Against the wall here is an iron bar. You hear the water ahead of you?’

‘Yes, and smell it.’

‘Of course. In the channel there are stones. They are jammed in, probably against some larger boulder or debris in the channel. The water is backing up. Much more and it will flood the chambers.’

‘I am to break it up, to clear the channel.’

‘Yes. Beware, my friend, the water here is very fast. If you lose your footing, you will be cast down the channel. Darkness. Drowning. Beating against the tunnel as it washes you down to whatever spring outlet it has on down the current... A grim and lonely death. There will be nothing we can do.’

I nodded. ‘Well then... I will need some light. I cannot hammer in the darkness.’

‘I will leave you my candle. I do not have the art to light the rocks as they do.’

Without more words he lit the light as he had before and left it flickering on a tiny ledge not far from me. He placed

half a dozen unlit candles in a little pile not far from the burning one.

I took up the bar.

For seven days – measured only by the frequency of my sleep – I smote the stones in the channel, breaking them into smaller blocks that I either piled upon the wall behind me, or let wash away in the rushing stream. Sirrah had not exaggerated; the current pulled at my feet like ropes, and more than once I felt the inner jolt of alarm as a foot lost its hold and, for a brief moment, I feared falling beneath the dark water. As the channel opened, the power of the current became more insistent. When at last I found the main blockage, and struck it with the bar, I was shocked to feel the surface of it give, absorb the power of the blow, and spring back into its original shape.

I felt the face of it with my hand and drew it back sharply. Tiny spines lined the surface. It felt like saddle leather with poison oak growing through it. I tried a few more strikes, without effect, and then set the bar down against the wall.

This was new to me, and the day had been long. I would leave it until morning and bring Sirrah with me to see if he had any insight as to what the thing was.

I knew the way easily now, from the watery cavern to the little room they had set aside for Sirrah and me. I walked almost without thought through the darkness, one hand or the other held up in front of me, relaxed and easy, and occasionally I would reach out with the other one to touch

a wall or drag my fingers along it in anticipation of an opening. Even these measures were no more necessary than much of what we look at in the lighted world. We need very little sight to cook or eat our food, to navigate our own homes, or to warm ourselves by the fire – and yet we use so much of it. It was likewise, there in the dark, but it was the generous use of touch and sound instead.

I sensed the opening ahead just before my hand felt the outward curvature of the wall and I turned down the short passage to our room. I was met by the earthy smell of *skrath*, the savoury stew-like meal they made from some kind of wall-growing fungus in the lower caves. I felt my stomach rumble and the waters loosen from the back of my tongue. There was the heat too, emanating from the cooking contraption that sat near the back of the room and was fed by a pipe from somewhere lower down. It came up through the floor, provided steam on demand, and could bring the flat stone top of the machine to a scalding temperature in a few minutes. I often wondered what great furnace they kept in the depths of that place, to power their lives, or if perhaps they had drilled down into the underworld of fiery gods and monsters, with their homes of black flames of shadow.

As these thoughts came, I saw the glow ahead. It would be just a single candle, but the glow of it would hit me like staring into a bonfire after a night's walk in the dark woods.

'Hello Sontar. Are you early today?'

'Who could tell? But I quit before I was spent.'

'Are you finished?'

‘Very nearly – or not at all – I am unsure.’ Rather than complete the thought, I paused, pulling a trick from Sirrah’s book, letting some curiosity build in my listener.

Sirrah, wise to his own tactics, feigned disinterest. He would ask me later, if unable to unravel it for himself. I expected a query before we slept.

‘Is there some of that skrath for me?’

‘Yes, of course, but you’ve surprised me, and it will need some time yet on the boil before it is toothsome. Sit, rest yourself. There is a waterskin by the wall if you aren’t sick of the stuff after a day standing in it.’

I lowered myself onto my thick mats by the wall and relaxed for the first time since what I guessed to be early morning. A long breath released from body, and I settled into that feeling that only comes when a hard day of work is over and there are no more expectations save rest and sleep. I was satisfied, hungry though I was. I let my mind take what course it would. At length, it fell upon something that had been niggling at me during the long days of toil.

‘Are we guarded?’

‘Eh?’ I had disturbed Sirrah from some thought as he cooked.

‘I have wondered, since Kirdek let me go – or sentenced me to stay, if that is nearer the mark – do they guard me during the day? I have sensed no one.’

‘There are guards, surely, mainly from threats that stumble in from outside of their community. But no, I would say they are not guarding you. Not in the way you mean.’

I pondered this. ‘But why? You have been here a long time and, meaning no offense, you are not a warrior, nor young. Me, I am from outside. I am new. I can wield a sword or any other weapon better than many, and I stand more than twice the height of most of these down here who bear arms... are they not afraid?’

Sirrah pulled the skrath from the heat and doled some out into two stone bowls. We would eat with our fingers, as was normal for the Tirdathi. ‘No, I do not think they are afraid. For one thing, they have far more battle prowess than it would appear. Yes, you are bigger and a hit from you would be powerful, but a hit in the right place from even a small warrior kills a man just as surely, does it not?’

‘But that is just it; if they do not guard me, there is no such little warrior around to check me if I were to rebel. Why would I not one day turn on them and do much damage before such guards were able to reach me?’

‘You forget, that it is not just their bodies that differ from those of us who have lived our lives on the outside. We are upworlders; they are downworlders. Many things are different here. This seems a secure and happy community, and it is, but not without a great deal of work. Not without a great deal of trust.’

‘You return to talk of trust.’

‘Yes, as I should! It is all to do with trust down here. They gave me a job to care for you in this new place, and I must do it. If I don’t, they will be able to tell, and their trust will be broken. Until I do not do my job, though, what cause is

there for them to doubt that it is being done? Likewise, you were told to clear the water passage. Was there a taskmaster with a whip above you, laying stripes on your back as a reminder of what is to be done? No! You pick up your bar and strike and clear until the job is no longer there. If you fail, they will know. If you succeed, they will know. Until they have let you alone to get on with it though, neither one can be the case.'

'Even though I am a captive?'

'Especially in such a case.'

'Though the threat is more likely?'

'Trust is easy when consequences of betrayal are small. It becomes something bigger – something profound – when placed on someone or something that can cause a great harm. The chance of betrayal is only that – a chance – it is not real. But the act of mistrust causes a real and constant state of unease. That is a self-inflicted wound, and one they do not wish to bear. They are too close, down here... to connected... They could not abide a life like that.'

I took a mouthful of skrath and thought this through. I needed time to weigh his words.

'Now this riddle of yours...' he continued, 'Very nearly finished, or not at all. What is its meaning?'

I swallowed my bite and moved into the new subject quite happily. 'I have one more obstacle to remove, a big one, and then I think the flow will be restored.'

'Good. They will be pleased with you.'

'It is strange though, as if some great ox has fallen into the channel and lodged there. There is give when I strike it and the power is sucked out of the blow. I will need a different tool. Something to cut it away I think.'

'Like an ox?'

I nodded.

'Show me this thing.' There was an edge to his voice.

'Huh? Now?'

'Yes, I think so. Just a quick walk there and back. If I have seen it, I will know better what kind of tool to request.'

I shrugged at what seemed a simple request laid over something bigger, but I was too tired to argue much, and had too much already on my mind, trying to process the strange ways of my hosts and captors. Esrid was still on my mind too, ever there, standing in the shadows of each day with her eyes on me, expectant, wondering where I was and why I had not yet come for her. I was powerless, at that time, to do so, and so I let her stay there, for the moment, lingering on the fringes of my dark thoughts in the dark weight of the tunnels.

We passed from our rooms down the hall, Sirrah bearing his candle in front of him, though I suspected he, too, could do without it. We would need it once we arrived at the little room, to see the blockage in the tunnel. As we approached though, I noted something different.

'The water,' I whispered, 'The sound has changed.'

I moved around in front of him and strode into the room. I smiled. Whatever had been lodged in there had come free

since I had left the room and the channel now flowed freely and swiftly by, unhindered by any blockage.

‘Your riddle is solved, my friend – I am finished.’ I smiled. There was something about that place, especially since I had spoken with Sirrah over our meal, that made the work different from what I had done in the north. As he said, there was no taskmaster watching my every move. There was no threat of consequence to me for doing other than what I was asked to do. There was only the task, given to me, done by me, and now fulfilled. Sirrah was right, I realised, there was something different in that subtle change... that little difference in my state of mind.

He seemed to let out a breath of stress too, and to relax.

‘Good. I am glad. I will speak to them after we sleep and find out what is next.’ He paused a moment in thought, looking on the free-flowing channel. ‘They may have more work for you, and they may have questions about this work as well. You will need rest to face them again. If it is Kirdek who meets with us, or another like him, you will need your wits about you and your hot temper mastered.’

‘Hot temper?’

‘Yes.’

‘My temper is as cool as any man’s!’

‘Yes,’ he said, smiling at the deep furrows in my brow, holding shadows in the candlelight, ‘That much is obvious. Come, let us finish our meal and I will teach you a game before we sleep. It has no name that I know of, but I call it Hollows. It is simple at first glance, but there is much

thought involved to play it well – and always there is an expectation of politeness. It may help you to understand the way Tirdathi joust with words, and the way they think when they do so.’

‘And does the way I think not matter?’

‘It matters less, and it matters more. It matters less because you are the captive, or guest here, and it matters more because, if you can gain an understanding of your adversary’s mind, as well as your own, you will have an advantage over a foe who only knows his own. Muster as many advantages as you can, Sontar, before any great or dangerous endeavour, and you are more likely to emerge successful on the other side of it. I am not your father, and you did not seek this advice from me, but I give it nonetheless. You will choose to take it or leave it as you will, of course.’

Our conversation shifted then, to stories of his life and mine, shared while finishing the stew, and then there was laughter and good-natured competition as we played the game and he showed me the layers of complexity that often lie below the seemingly simple. When we were finished, I lay back upon my bed and took in a deep breath of the air, filled as it was with the remnants of steam from the cooking, the chalky dust of cavernous air, and the acrid flavour of the snuffed-out candle drifting through the darkness. Somewhere in my wandering thought I passed from the darkness of the waking world into the lighter dreams of the

slumbering one, and then deeper, into the darkness and rest of sleep.

But Sirrah remained awake, long into my rest, staring into the darkness with eyes that would not close.