

THE LAST
BLACKBIRD

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CONTENTS

1. The Commissioning of Ayathra	1
2. Surok's Fall	15
3. Cro's Awakening	28
4. The Sacred Tether	36
5. Esh'avel	41
6. Raine's Ascension	46
7. Raine's Rebellion	52
8. Legacy of Esh'avel	58
9. Ebele	63
10. Chain's Of Sacrifice	70
11. World of Shadows	76
12. Whispers to Esh'avel	83
13. Surok's Hunger	89
14. The Edge of Freedom	94
15. The Storm Breaks	100
16. The Reckoning of Shadow's Gate	105

17. The Farewell	110
About the author	115



1

THE COMMISSIONING OF ΔΥΑΘΡΑ

The throne room blazed with living light.

It poured from the high crystal arches, spilled through stained glass windows, and pooled across the crystalline floor until every step stirred ripples of color. Voices hushed to a tremor beneath the weight of that radiance. Today, all the Realm of Light had gathered to hear which of them would be called into new destinies.

Ayathra stood near the back of the great hall, fingers resting lightly on the leather bracer at her forearm. Upon it perched Eryon, her eagle, feathers glinting like burnished bronze in the glow. His talons

gripped her arm with familiar steadiness, a small, grounding weight as everything else shimmered and shifted around her.

“You are restless,” she whispered.

Eryon tilted his head, golden eyes sharp as he surveyed the gathered host. His beak clicked once, a quiet reprimand. Her mouth tugged in a faint smile. Of the two of them, it was not the eagle who doubted his place here.

At the far end of the hall, Ahavel rose from his radiant throne.

The murmuring ceased. Light gathered around him like a mantle, his silken robes refracting gold and silver as if he wore the very fabric of the heavens. When he lifted his hands, the air itself seemed to still.

“Citizens of the Realm of Light,” his voice rang out, deep and resonant, “today we mark the beginning of a new era. The balance of creation stretches before us. New realms, new peoples, new songs will be woven into the tapestry. For this work, new leaders must be raised.”

The words throbbed in Ayathra’s bones like a drumbeat. She had dreamed of this day in fragments: a hall of crystal, a voice like thunder, a quill burning in her hand. She had woken from those dreams with her heart racing, Eryon’s wings spread wide over her as if to shield her from something she could not yet name.

Now here she stood, just one figure among many.

To her left, the Radiant warriors gleamed in their ordered ranks, armor catching the light like a field of polished suns. Somewhere among them, she knew, was Surok—their fiercest commander, whose name had already become a legend in battle stories whispered through the Realm. She did not search for his face. Her own expectation frightened her enough.

“You do not have to be chosen,” a small, wry thought nudged. “You have served faithfully where you are.”

But under that thought, something deeper stirred. A call that had haunted her since the day of her creation, when she first opened her eyes to light and heard a whisper: *Write*.

Ahavel's gaze swept the assembly.

When his eyes reached her, they did not pass on.

“Ayathra.”

Her name was no louder than any other word he had spoken, yet the hall seemed to tilt around it. Ayathra's breath caught. Heat rushed to her cheeks. Eryon let out a piercing cry, wings flaring as if to urge her forward.

For a heartbeat she could not move.

This was madness. There were elders more learned than she, Oracles who had served longer within the Tower of Whispers. There were warriors whose deeds filled song. There was Surok, whose victories had secured the borders of the Realm. Why her?

Yet the call did not loosen its hold. It wrapped around her like light itself, gentle and inexorable.

Ayathra stepped out from the crowd.

The crystalline floor mirrored each hesitant stride as she walked the long aisle toward the throne. Colors shifted beneath her feet—amber to violet, gold to deepest blue—as if the hall were reading the tremor in her spirit and answering with its own. When she reached the base of the dais, she sank to one knee and bowed her head.

“Rise, Ayathra,” Ahavel said, his voice softening. “Daughter of Light, whose heart has listened when others turned away.”

She obeyed, though her legs shook.

Up close, she could see the weariness lining his ageless face, the sorrow at the corners of his eyes. Power did not spare him from grief; it sat with him. That thought steadied her.

Ahavel extended his hand. A quill rested upon his palm—long and slender, a shaft of radiant gold, its feather shimmering as though woven from dawn itself.

“This,” he said, “is no ordinary instrument. It is the voice of the divine, the first line in every story yet to be told.”

The quill pulsed faintly, as if recognizing her.

Ayathra swallowed. “I have seen it in dreams,” she murmured. “But in the dream, I could not write. The light poured through me, and I... failed it.”

“Dreams often reveal the fear beneath our calling,” Ahavel replied. “You fear that what is entrusted to you will be twisted or lost.”

His gaze drifted for an instant toward the Radiant ranks. A shadow passed across his features—just a flicker, gone as soon as it appeared.

“There are covenants already spoken in haste and fear,” he added more quietly. “Promises made for protection that may demand too high a price. If you accept this charge, you will not only write new worlds—you will guard them from those who would claim what was never theirs to own.”

A chill ran down Ayathra’s spine.

“What price?” she asked.

Ahavel’s eyes returned to hers. “That is not yet written. But I tell you this: some will one day demand the firstborn of your line as payment for a bargain that should never have been struck.”

Images flashed in her mind unbidden: a child’s shadow chained to a burning shore; a warrior’s face contorted by pride and hunger; a mountain split by flame.

Ayathra drew a breath that felt like swallowing a storm.

“And still,” Ahavel said, “I ask: Ayathra, will you accept this quill? Will you lead the Oracles of the Veil, and bear the weight of what must be spoken?”

Eryon's talons tightened on her arm. His steady weight, the familiar warmth of his plumage against her skin, rooted her in the present.

She lifted her chin.

"I will," she said. "Though my hand trembles, I will."

Hall of Wisdom

Ahavel closed his fingers around the quill.

"Come," he said. "What must be spoken next is not for open court."

The hall exhaled as the gathered host began to murmur again, the tension of the moment dispersing into a hundred whispered speculations. Ayathra felt their eyes follow her as she stepped down from the dais at Ahavel's side. Some gazes held awe, others curiosity. Among the Radiant ranks, she sensed something hotter, sharper, like a spark pressed against dry tinder, though she still refused to seek its source.

Eryon launched from her arm and rose to the vaulted ceiling, circling once before slipping through a high window of colored glass. Light swallowed him. She felt the absence of his weight keenly, like a bracelet suddenly removed.

Two towering doors at the rear of the throne room parted as Ahavel approached. Beyond lay a passage lined with stone that glowed from within, its surface traced with veins of soft blue light. As they passed through, the din of the outer hall faded until only the sound of their footsteps remained.

"This way," Ahavel said.

The corridor opened into a vast circular chamber.

Shelves carved from luminous stone rose all the way to the domed ceiling, cradling tomes bound in metal and leather that seemed to pulse faintly with their own inner shine. Glyphs of living light hovered

above the walls, shifting and recombining as if thinking. At the center of the room stood a single table of polished crystal, its surface reflecting their faces in fractured, shifting patterns.

The Hall of Wisdom.

Ayathra had heard elders whisper of this place, but few had ever stepped within it. She felt suddenly small, a single point of darkness walking through a universe of stars.

Ahavel moved to the table and laid the quill upon it.

Up close, it was even more alive. The barbs of the feather caught the light in hues that changed with each breath—gold, then white, then something colorless and pure. When she reached toward it, a faint humming rose in the air, the way stone might hum when thunder walks the earth.

“This quill was bound to you on the day of your creation,” Ahavel said. “Before you drew your first breath, the Creator set your name within it.”

Ayathra frowned. “If that is so... why do I remember only shadows? Whispers I cannot quite hold?”

“Because knowing and accepting are not the same.” A hint of warmth curved his mouth. “The Creator does not force what must be offered freely.”

He gestured to the shelves around them. “Every covenant, every song, every story that has shaped our realms is recorded here. Some are bright. Others are... less so.”

He walked to a nearby shelf and drew out a slender volume bound in dark metal. When he opened it, the script inside writhed like ink spilled into water, then stilled into legible form.

“Here,” he said, “is one of the ‘less so.’ An agreement forged in fear between the Radiant host and a cornered people who did not yet

understand their own worth. It promised protection in exchange for the firstborn of their kind.”

Ayathra’s throat tightened. “Was this your will?”

“No.” Grief flickered openly in Ahavel’s eyes. “It was mine to allow, not to command. I warned them, but terror speaks louder than patience in the hearts of many. And so the covenant stands, twisted in its intent. It has not yet come due, but its shadow lies upon the path you will walk.”

He closed the book. The metal cover clicked shut, the sound sharper than any shout.

“You will encounter those who wield this vow like a weapon,” he continued. “They will say, ‘The law is sealed in blood. The child is ours.’ You must remember: not all that is written here reflects the Creator’s heart. Your task is not only to inscribe what is, but to call forth what should be.”

Ayathra’s pulse battered her ribs. The image from the throne room flared again in her mind—a child bound, a mountain aflame.

“Why me?” she asked, her voice barely more than breath. “Why not choose one whose hands are steady? One who does not wake drowning in visions she cannot understand?”

“Because you do not delight in power,” Ahavel said simply. “You fear failing those you have not yet met. That fear, rightly held, becomes humility.” He lifted the quill and turned back to her. “And humility is the only shield sharp enough to cut through pride.”

He held the quill out.

Ayathra stared at it for a heartbeat, then extended her hands.

When the feather touched her palms, heat seared through her skin—not burning, but bright, as if light itself were burrowing into her bones. Her knees buckled. The chamber spun. For an instant she

was no longer standing on stone but suspended in a vast, formless expanse.

Darkness pressed in from every side, thick and heavy. Then a thin line of light appeared before her, stretching away into a distance she could not measure. It quivered, split, multiplied. From each branch, new paths erupted—some shining, some already stained with shadow.

Words rose unbidden to her lips.

“The threads,” she whispered. “I see the threads.”

“Yes,” came a voice that was and was not Ahavel’s, resonant and deep as the mountain’s heart. “You will walk among them. You will speak what you see. But remember, Ayathra: you are not the one who binds them. You are a witness, not the Weaver.”

In the shifting lights, she glimpsed flashes—a man with a scar like three claw marks across his chest, standing alone upon a desolate plain; a woman with silver-streaked hair and an eagle at her shoulder, singing to a child beneath a banyan tree; a shore choked with ships and chains; a gate of shadow cracking under a song.

Fear rose like a tide.

“I do not know how to bear this,” she said.

“You are not asked to bear it alone.”

Arms like wind and fire lifted her. The Hall of Wisdom flowed back into being around her. She stood once more before the crystal table, quill in hand, chest heaving.

Ahavel watched her with quiet compassion.

“Your journey is only beginning,” he said. “From here, we climb.”

He nodded toward the far wall, where a narrow stairway spiraled upward into the stone. Somewhere above, Ayathra could feel the open sky waiting—the Sacred Mountain, the place where the Creator’s presence descended in undimmed glory.

Eryon's cry echoed faintly from outside, as if he already circled that distant peak.

Ayathra closed her fingers more tightly around the quill, feeling its pulse answer the beat of her own heart.

"Then let us go," she said.

The Ascent and Commissioning

The stairway spiraled upward through solid stone, narrow and steep. Each step hummed faintly under Ayathra's feet, as if the mountain itself were remembering every soul who had climbed this path before her.

The higher they went, the thinner the air became. Breath frosted in front of her lips. The light in the walls shifted from blue to a pale, clear gold that grew brighter with every turn. Once, long ago, she had watched Ahavel ascend alone from the base of this mountain, his form swallowed by cloud. She had never imagined she would follow in his steps.

"Do all who are called climb this way?" she asked, voice echoing softly in the tight passage.

"No," Ahavel replied. "Some are called to waters, some to fire, some to silence. The mountain is for those whose words will shape more than their own lives."

It was not a boast; if anything, there was weariness in his tone.

They reached a final arch of stone.

Beyond it, the world opened.

The summit spread out like a vast, crystalline plateau, fringed by jagged peaks that speared into a sky of impossible blue. Lightning flickered silently along distant ridges. Two suns hung low, twin orbs of

molten white whose light turned the air to molten glass. The ground beneath Ayathra's feet was veined with luminous lines that converged toward the center of the plateau, where a single column of radiance poured down from the heavens.

Eryon circled high above, a dark shape cutting across the blinding light. His cry rang clear and fierce in the thin air.

Ayathra stepped onto the plateau, the quill still warm in her grip.

Every instinct begged her to kneel, to flatten herself against the stone and become small—so small the light would pass over her and seek another. Instead, she forced her feet forward, following the converging lines.

"Fear is not your enemy," Ahavel said quietly, walking at her side. "Pride is. Fear reminds you that you are not the center of all things."

"It also reminds me that I can be broken," Ayathra murmured.

"Both can be true."

They reached the edge of the descending radiance.

Up close, it was not a pillar at all but a torrent—light falling like water, streaming down from some unseen source above the sky. It made no sound, yet her bones vibrated with its presence. She could not look directly into it; it was as if all colors had been gathered into one, and that one was too much for mortal eyes.

"Step in," Ahavel said.

Ayathra stared at the light, fingers tightening around the quill until her knuckles ached.

"What if I am not enough?" she whispered.

"You are not," Ahavel replied. "That is why you were chosen. No single vessel can contain the fullness of what the Creator pours. You are called to be faithful, not flawless."

Something in her eased at that. She drew a breath that tasted of ice and sun, then took the last step.

The light swallowed her.

Every boundary she knew—skin, bone, thought—dissolved. She was not standing on stone; she was suspended in endless brightness, weightless and utterly transparent. The quill in her hand burned white-hot, yet did not consume her flesh. Instead, it seemed to pierce straight through into the core of her being.

“Ayathra.”

The voice came from everywhere at once, deeper than thunder, softer than a mother’s song. It spoke her name as if it had been saying it since before time began.

“Daughter of Light,” the voice continued. “You have been weighed in the scales of my intent and found willing.”

Visions flared around her, not as separate images but as strands of possibility woven through the light. She saw oceans boiling into existence, mountains thrusting up from the deep, forests unfurling like green banners. She saw shadow as well, curling along the edges—not a mistake, but a necessary contrast, a place where choice could live.

“You will be my witness,” the voice said. “Singer of the flame that does not consume, guardian of the balance between realms.”

Ayathra tried to speak, but only tears came. They burned, then turned to light like everything else.

“Will you accept this charge?” the voice asked.

She thought of the Hall of Wisdom, of the dark-bound book and its twisted covenant. She thought of Radiant warriors whose pride gleamed as bright as their armor. She thought of unnamed people whose lives might be bent or broken by words she had yet to speak.

“I am afraid,” she confessed.

“That is honest,” the voice said. “Will you accept it anyway?”

Ayathra lifted the quill.

“Yes,” she said. Her voice sounded small against the vastness, but the word rang true. “I accept.”

“Then write.”

There was no parchment, no stone. Only air and light.

Ayathra hesitated, then lifted the quill and drew it through the radiance.

Where its tip passed, lines of molten gold trailed in its wake. They did not fade. They thickened, widened, poured downward. As she traced the shape that rose in her mind, the light hardened into land—a curve of shore, a sweep of hills, a mountain veiled in mist. Rivers carved paths through the blankness, their courses following the pull of her intent.

“Here,” she whispered, not knowing how she knew, “will stand a land of healing. A place where songs echo long after chains have fallen.”

The voice thrummed approval.

She wrote on.

Forests unfurled, trees rising where she brushed the quill in branching strokes. Creatures stirred in the undergrowth. Birds burst into being with each flick of her wrist, some sharp-winged and fierce, some small and quick, all of them carrying pieces of the sky in their feathers. Eryon’s cry answered from somewhere far above, and she smiled through her tears.

“You are the vessel,” the voice said. “Through you, the plan will unfold. But others will try to unmake what you have written. They will claim your lines as their own, twist them into chains.”

Images flashed: a golden mane scorched black; a radiant medallion turned to shackle; a ship’s hold choking with bodies.

“When they demand your firstborn,” the voice said, “remember this moment. Remember that no child is minted as payment. They are given, not taken.”

Ayathra’s hand faltered.

“Will I have a child?” she asked, the question spilling out before she could quell it.

Light shivered.

“In time,” the voice replied. “And when that time comes, you will be asked to choose between the letter of a covenant and the heartbeat of my image. I will not command your answer. I will be with you in it.”

The quill in her hand cooled.

The light receded—not all at once, but like a tide drawing back from the shore. Weight returned to her limbs. The roar of her own blood filled her ears. She found herself once more on her knees at the center of the plateau, palms splayed against the cold stone, the quill clutched tight.

Around her, the mountain still blazed with sunlight. But when she looked down, she saw something new.

The luminous veins converging beneath her feet now traced the outline of a land that had not existed before—a cluster of hills, a mist-veiled mountain, a river curling like a silver thread toward a distant sea.

Ayathra’s breath caught.

“I wrote that,” she whispered.

“You did,” Ahavel said from beside her. She had not noticed him kneel. “And more than you yet see.”

She pushed herself upright. The quill gleamed in her hand, no longer blinding, but steady.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now we return,” Ahavel said. “The Oracles await their leader. And the realms you have begun await their guardians.”

Eryon swooped down from the sky, landing on her arm with a force that almost toppled her. His talons dug into the leather bracer. He tucked his head once under his wing, then fixed her with a fierce, approving gaze, as if to say: *I knew you could stand in the light.*

Ayathra drew a long, steadying breath.

“Then let us go home,” she said.

Together, they descended the Sacred Mountain—Ayathra no longer merely a seeker, but the one who had written the first line of a world that did not yet know her name.



2

SUROK'S FALL

At the farthest edge of the Realm of Light, where the golden savannahs met cliffs veined with fire, lay the lands of the Radiants. Here the sun never fully set; it rolled along the horizon like a molten coin, casting long spears of light across the training fields.

Surok stood at the crest of a rise and watched his warriors move.

They flowed across the open ground in disciplined waves, their bronze-hued bodies gleaming, their spears catching the light. Each formation pivoted at his signal—one sharp gesture of his hand—and the pattern shifted with lethal precision. Dust rose beneath their feet, then settled again in neat lines.

“Again,” he called.

His voice carried easily over the field. The Radiants re-formed into new ranks without complaint. They trusted him. He had led them

through storms of shadow and flame, had stood in the breach when the old borders trembled under assault. Songs were already being sung of the battles where his scarred chest had been the last wall between darkness and the heart of the Realm.

The scar itself pulsed dully beneath his armor now, three jagged furrows that stretched from collarbone to ribs—a mark left by a creature of pure void on a night when even the stars had seemed to flinch. The healers had told him he should have died from that wound. Instead, he had risen. The Realm remembered.

Today, he thought, they will remember differently.

He turned his gaze from the field to the horizon, where the spires of the divine hall reached for the sky like spears carved from dawn. A summons had come at daybreak, carried on a ribbon of light that had unfolded in his tent.

Attend the voice of the divine.

He knew what that meant. The Twelve empty thrones that circled Ahavel's seat had waited long enough. One by one, they would be filled. Those who had bled most for the Realm would be called to lay down sword for scepter—war not to be their only legacy, but foundation for rulership.

No one had said the words outright, but Surok had heard them implied in every oath of thanks, in every clasped forearm after battle. *When the time comes, they had promised, you will stand among the Twelve.*

Surok flexed his fingers, feeling the old ache in his right hand where a bone had once shattered under the force of a blow. He had never cared for titles. What mattered was what they signified.

“Commander,” a voice said at his shoulder.

He did not need to turn to know who had spoken. Talen, his lieutenant, always approached with that same blend of deference and familiarity.

“You should go,” Talen said. “The hall does not wait.”

Surok let his gaze linger one more breath on the warriors, then nodded. “Keep them moving. When I return, we will spar.”

He descended the rise, each step measured. The path to the divine hall cut through the heart of the Radiant lands, past banners hung with sigils of old victories, past shrines where candles burned before images of the Creator’s light. Children paused in their games to stare up at him with wide eyes; elders bowed their heads as he passed.

Honor wrapped around him like a cloak. It sat well on his shoulders.

Yet beneath the hum of respect, another current tugged at him—a restless, gnawing question: *What if they pass you over? What if all your wounds were merely convenient?*

He pushed it aside.

Inside the divine hall, light multiplied. Walls of celestial crystal refracted the twin suns into a thousand splinters, painting the air with shifting bands of color. The floor was clear as water, revealing the swirling cosmos below, stars and nebulae drifting in slow, majestic eddies. At the center, Ahavel sat cloaked in radiance upon the high throne, surrounded by the Twelve empty seats.

Not all were empty now.

Ayathra stood near the base of the dais, the feathered quill he had seen only in legends gleaming in her hand. Around her, Oracles in flowing robes watched with a mixture of awe and something like relief, as if a burden they had feared to carry had finally found its rightful bearer.

Surok’s jaw tightened.

He had heard whispers of her commissioning, of how she had climbed the Sacred Mountain and walked in the unfiltered presence of the Creator. He did not begrudge her the honor—she had always been devout, quiet, strange in ways that set her apart even among the seers. But the timing...

He stopped a measured distance from the foot of the dais and dropped to one knee.

“You called, great Ahavel,” he said, keeping his voice steady.

The voice of the divine rose, resonant and unyielding. “I did. Rise, Surok.”

He stood. The hall felt smaller suddenly, despite its vastness. Ayathra stepped back into the shadows at the edge of the throne’s light, Eryon now perched upon a high ledge, watching with an unblinking gaze.

“You have led the Radiant host with courage and skill,” Ahavel said. “Your strength has been a bulwark at the borders of our realm. Many live because you did not turn away when darkness advanced.”

Surok inclined his head. Praise was a familiar weight, but today it scraped against the raw place inside him.

“You have bled for us,” Ahavel continued. “And for this, you have the gratitude of all the realms.”

A pulse of warmth moved through the hall as those gathered bowed their heads. Surok’s scar burned in answer. *Yes*, he thought. *This is the prelude. Now speak the rest. Call my name among the Twelve.*

Ahavel’s gaze did not waver.

“Yet strength alone does not fit one to govern the balance of creation,” he said. “The Twelve must hold their seats with humility, for they will bear the weight of decisions that shape not only war, but the hearts of those who come after.”

A faint unease pricked Surok’s spine.

“I have always served the Realm,” he said carefully. “I ask nothing for myself that does not also serve its good.”

“Your loyalty has never been in question,” Ahavel replied. “But your heart still seeks honor more than obscured obedience. You crave the mountain’s summit, not for what you might give there, but for what it might say about you.”

The words landed like blows.

Heat flared in Surok’s chest. He forced his hands to remain at his sides.

“Then I am not to be seated among the Twelve,” he said. It was not a question.

“No.”

Silence dropped heavy over the hall. Somewhere above, Eryon shifted, talons scraping stone.

“I have chosen another for that path,” Ahavel continued. “Ayathra will take her place among the Oracles of the Veil, to speak what she has seen. Your role is different, but no less vital. You will lead the Exalted Vanguard—the strongest of our factions—to defend the new creation she has begun. You will be its shield.”

Surok heard the words, but they did not fit.

Shield. Vanguard. Necessary, yes. Honorable, yes. Yet still... *outside*. While others sat in light and wrote the worlds into being, he would continue to stand in the dust and blood, a weapon wielded by hands that never felt the scars.

For a heartbeat, the edges of his vision blurred. He saw himself as others might: scarred, formidable, always in motion, never at rest. Useful.

Always useful.

Ahavel stepped down from the throne and lifted a medallion, a disk of metal inscribed with sigils of command. It glimmered as if lit from within.

He placed it around Surok's neck.

"Do not let pride cloud your judgment," he said softly, though his words carried to every corner of the hall. "Fulfill your role with honor, and you will find peace."

The medallion rested heavy against Surok's chest. Its glow felt less like blessing than shackle.

"Peace," he echoed, the word tasting strange in his mouth.

He bowed again because there was nothing else he could do without shattering everything he had built. When he straightened, his face was composed, his posture proud. Only his fists, clenched at his sides, betrayed him.

As he turned to leave, his gaze brushed Ayathra's for the briefest instant.

She did not gloat. There was only a quiet sorrow in her eyes, as if she understood some piece of what this denial cost him. That, somehow, stung worst of all.

Surok walked down the length of the hall, past the watching Radiants, past Oracles and artisans and lesser spirits. With each step, the light behind him felt more distant.

He did not look back at the empty thrones.

He looked instead to the eastern wall—where a massive door, carved with secrets, stood closed. Beyond it, he knew, lay the path to the Sacred Mountain and the place where Ayathra had stood in undimmed light.

Only the Twelve and the Oracles of the Veil were permitted beyond that door.

His scar throbbed.

They chose wrong, he thought, the words hot and clear as molten metal. If they will not grant what I have earned, I will claim it.

Ascent

The great doors of the hall closed behind him with a sound like distant thunder.

For a long heartbeat Surok stood in the antechamber, breath harsh in his ears, the medallion of command heavy against his chest. Light spilled through the high windows in softened bands, but it felt different here—thinner, somehow, as if the brilliance of the throne room had leeches it of warmth.

He turned toward the eastern wall.

The door there dwarfed the others. It rose from floor to ceiling, carved from a single slab of stone shot through with veins of gold and blue. Glyphs of ancient covenant spiraled across its surface, some glowing faintly, others dim, as if their time had passed. At its center, an image of the Sacred Mountain loomed, peaks wreathed in cloud.

Only the Twelve and the Oracles of the Veil were permitted beyond this threshold.

Surok laid his palm against the cool stone.

For a moment nothing happened. The glyphs remained dull. Then, slowly, faint lines of light began to stir beneath his fingers, spreading outward in hesitant branches.

“You know this path is not yours.”

The voice was not Ahavel’s. It was softer, like wind sliding over stone—a warning woven into the mountain’s own memory.

Surok ignored it.

“I have fought for this realm,” he said, fingers pressing more firmly into the carved surface. “I have bled for its borders while others sat in halls and weighed my worth. If the summit is reserved for those who shape creation, then I will show you what I can shape.”

The light beneath his palm brightened.

The door shuddered.

With a grinding sound like distant glaciers breaking, it parted.

Beyond lay a tunnel sloping upward into shadow, the air within cold and thin. Surok stepped through without hesitation. As he did, the medallion around his neck warmed, then cooled, as if unsure whether to restrain him or let him go.

The passage climbed in a relentless curve, narrower and steeper than the stair Ayathra had taken. Where her ascent had been accompanied by soft internal light, Surok’s path was marked by jagged protrusions of stone and sudden drops of temperature that stole the breath from his lungs.

He welcomed the hardship. It felt familiar.

The higher he climbed, the more the mountain seemed to resist him. Rocks shifted under his feet, forcing him to adjust. Cracks opened briefly at the edges of the path, hissing steam, then sealed shut again. Once, a gust of icy wind slammed into him with enough force to stagger him backward several steps.

“Turn back,” the wind whispered.

Surok set his jaw and drove forward.

“You sent me to the edges of your realms,” he muttered, hauling himself over a jut of stone. “You let my blood soak your borders. Now you would deny me the heart of your mountain?”

The path tilted sharply.

At last, after what might have been hours or might have been only a few brutal minutes, the tunnel ended.

He burst out onto the exposed shoulder of the Sacred Mountain.

The summit stretched above him, a jagged crown of crystal and stone. Clouds churned around it in a slow, sullen ring, shot through with silent lightning. Below, the realms sprawled in miniature: the Radiant lands glowing like a field of embers, the gleam of the divine hall, the distant glimmer of Ayathra's newly written world, still half in vision, half in substance.

Surok's breath burned in his chest. His legs trembled. He refused to pause.

He climbed.

There was no path now, only raw rock and treacherous slopes. His fingers bled where they scraped against crystal shards. More than once he slid back, catching himself on an outcropping at the last instant. Each time, the scar across his chest flared white-hot, as if remembering another ascent, another defiance.

"Is this all you have?" he shouted hoarsely into the wind. "Stones and storms? I have walked through worse at your command!"

The sky answered.

Thunder cracked directly overhead, a sound so vast it seemed to split his bones. Lightning speared the ground a few paces ahead, blasting a spray of molten rock into the air. Surok shielded his face with his arms, then pushed through the smoking debris.

At last, he reached the summit.

Here, the air was thin as glass. The ground beneath his feet was smooth, a wide circle of stone etched with concentric rings of sigils. At its center stood the Sacred Stone: a monolith of pure light, taller than any tower, its surface covered in symbols that shifted and swam like reflections on water.

Surok stopped at its base.

Heat poured from the Stone in gentle waves. Within its glow he glimpsed flashes—stars being born, rivers carving valleys, Ayathra on her knees in the torrent of light, quill in hand.

Jealousy stabbed him so sharp it stole his breath.

“She stands here, and I do not,” he whispered. “She writes, while I bleed.”

He lifted his scarred hand.

“Not anymore.”

His fingers brushed the Stone.

For one heartbeat, nothing happened.

Warmth flooded his arm, spreading up into his shoulder, through his chest. He could feel the structure of the world—the bones of mountains, the curves of seas, the trembling balance between light and shadow—laid bare beneath his touch. Power rose, a tide he could ride if only he let go of everything else.

This, he thought fiercely, is what they feared to give me. This is what I was meant to wield.

He pressed his palm flat against the Stone.

The mountain screamed.

Stone buckled beneath his feet. Fissures tore outward from where he stood, carving jagged lines through the summit. Fire erupted from the cracks, not the gentle gold of creation but a harsh, tearing flame that devoured whatever it touched.

The sky darkened.

Surok tried to wrench his hand away, but something held it fast. The warm tide turned to acid, burning through his veins. He fell to his knees, a raw shout ripping from his throat.

“Surok!”

The voice that thundered across the peak was not Ahavel’s this time. It was older, deeper, vibrating through every layer of stone.

“You have defiled what is not yours to claim.”

Surok squeezed his eyes shut against the searing light.

“I only sought to understand!” he cried. “To prove I am worthy!”

“You sought power for yourself,” the voice said. “Not for the good of creation.”

The Sacred Stone flared.

The scar across his chest split open—not with blood, but with light, three searing lines that carved through flesh and bone. Pain lanced through him, white and total. He pitched forward, fingers finally torn from the Stone.

“You are unworthy of this summit,” the voice pronounced. “For your pride, you are banished from the lands of light. You will walk in shadow until you learn humility.”

The ground vanished.

Surok fell.

He plummeted through darkness, past the roots of mountains, past rivers of molten stone. Time lost meaning. His scream shredded into silence. At last, he struck ground that was not ground, but something dense and yielding like ash.

He lay there, gasping, staring up at a sky the color of bruised iron.

The Shadow Lands.

The horizon here was jagged and barren, the land scored with cracks that exhaled slow, poisonous vapors. No sun rode this sky, only a sourceless, dim grey light that cast everything in sickly half-tone. Shadows moved without source, slithering along the ground, whispering his name in voices like cracked glass.

Surok pushed himself upright.

His once-gleaming skin had dulled; the copper warmth was leached to a cold, muted tone. His golden locs hung heavy and ash-dusted

around his face. The medallion of command lay half-buried in the soil at his feet, its glow extinguished.

Across his chest, the three-clawed scar blazed with an eerie light.

He lifted a hand to touch it. The pain that shot through him was sharp, but beneath it pulsed something else—a strange, cold clarity.

“I am forgotten,” he said bitterly to the empty land. “Cast out. While they sit in their halls and write their worlds.”

Shadows gathered at the edges of his vision, drawn to the taste of his anger.

Somewhere above—impossibly far now—the Sacred Mountain still stood. In its light, Ayathra would be descending, quill in hand, to show the Oracles the land she had just written. He saw it again in his mind: a curve of shore, a mist-veiled mountain, a river gleaming like silver.

The vision shifted.

He saw the same land under a different sky—choked with smoke, its river clogged with ships heavy with chains. He saw a child there, marked by light and eagle’s shadow, reaching for the heavens. He saw Ayathra’s face contorted in grief.

The sight steadied him.

“Oh, I will walk in your shadows,” he murmured. “I will use them. I will twist every covenant written in fear until it serves me. If you will not give me a throne, I will take a crown from the ruins of what she loves.”

The scar across his chest flared brighter, casting long, warped shadows around him.

Surok straightened.

He took his first step across the desolate plain, each footfall leaving a faint scorch mark in the ash. Behind him, the whispers of the Shadow Lands rose in a hungry chorus.

Ahead, somewhere far beyond sight, a young world Ayathra had only just begun to write waited—unaware of the storm that had already started to gather in its unseen sky.

3

CRO'S AWAKENING



The Arrival of Ayathra

Cro opened his eyes, and the darkness swallowed him whole.

Obsidian night pressed down upon him with immense gravity, a suffocating weight that bound his being to the earth. Convulsions rippled through his limbs as though the world itself rejected him, yet he could not move. His existence lay suspended—a breath caught in time.

He groped through the pressure with his mind and found only cold stone.

His trembling hands traced the contours of his body, foreign and unfamiliar. He was bare—a vessel of untested purpose. His legs curled instinctively, mirroring the cramped, womb-like chamber that held him.

Encased in Eshavel's embrace for a thousand silent years, he had been a fragment of time embedded in stone.

Something in him refused to stay buried.

With his first ragged breath, death surrendered to life, and the universe seemed to stir in faint acknowledgment. He braced his feet and pushed. The stone hummed—a deep, reluctant protest. Hairline fractures splintered outward, dust sifting down across his face.

Again.

He drove upward with every scrap of strength. The chamber shuddered. Cracks widened. The earth beneath him trembled—and with a resounding crack, the rock split open.

A jagged fissure carved through his prison, sending debris cascading through the air. Cro shielded his face as ash and dust rained upon him.

Then came the light.

A swirling brilliance pierced the darkness, searing his retinas. He recoiled as pain shot through his skull, but slowly, his eyes adjusted to the radiance.

When the world resolved into clarity, it was larger and more magnificent than he could comprehend.

Rolling hills stretched endlessly, adorned with trees whose spired branches clawed at the heavens. A river wound through the valley below like a silver thread. A vastness he could not yet name spread before him, so wide his chest ached trying to contain it.

He did not know where he was.

He did not know who he was.

Then he saw her.

Two wings, vast and resplendent, cut through the air with a grace that defied the limits of creation. Her shadow danced across the ground in hypnotic circles, her movements deliberate and powerful.

But it was not just the wings that struck him—it was the figure who emerged.

Human in form, she descended from the heavens, her silhouette caught between light and shadow, and landed just beyond his reach. Feathers dissolved into light as her feet touched stone. Dark skin, rich as fertile earth, gleamed in the twin suns. Her hair—long locs streaked with silver—flowed down her back like a river of twilight. Her eyes were sharp and golden, holding the same fierce clarity he had seen in the eagle’s gaze.

Their eyes met, and Cro’s blood ran cold, then hot.

Her gaze was commanding, but not cruel. Every movement exuded a regal majesty that left him breathless. The wind carried her breath to him—a whisper of power and promise.

He tried to push himself up, but his legs trembled uselessly.

Before he could find his voice, Ayathra moved.

In one fluid motion, she extended her hand. “Rise,” she commanded.

Cro hesitated, dust and blood tacky on his skin, his legs shaking beneath him. He looked at her hand—strong, steady, impossibly sure—and something in him chose.

He accepted her hand, and with surprising strength, she lifted him to his feet. Her touch was warm, grounding him even as the vastness of the world threatened to overwhelm his senses.

“You have slept long enough,” Ayathra said. Her voice carried a melodic cadence, yet it was firm, each word a note of authority. “The Veil calls. And you must answer.”

The words meant nothing to him, but the certainty in them did.

“The... Veil?” he managed.

Ayathra turned toward the horizon.

The hills rose and fell in gentle waves. Beyond them, a shrouded expanse loomed—dark, ethereal, and trembling at the edges. It was as if the sky itself had unraveled in one place, leaving a shimmering wound where light and shadow bled together.

“That is the Veil of Time,” she said. “A boundary between what was and what waits to be.”

The horizon seemed to pulse in answer, a slow, otherworldly rhythm that tugged at something deep inside him.

Above them, a golden eagle soared, its radiant feathers glinting in the sunlight. It circled once before diving toward them with a piercing cry.

Ayathra raised her arm. The eagle landed, its claws gripping the leather bracer she wore. The bond between them was palpable—a silent communication flowing between seer and companion.

“Eryon,” she murmured, stroking the eagle’s feathers. “He has guided me to you, Cro. Your name was whispered in the Tower of Whispers long before this moment. You have been chosen, not by accident but by purpose.”

Cro’s chest tightened. The name sat strangely on his tongue, unfamiliar yet somehow true.

“What purpose?” he asked, his voice trembling. “I woke in rock. I can barely stand.”

Ayathra’s piercing gaze met his, her golden eyes shining with an ancient light.

“To be the Chronarch,” she said. “You will stitch together the frayed edges of time. You will be the bridge between what has been and what will be. But to claim this path, you must accept the weight of it.”

Her words struck him like a physical blow.

He staggered, his mind reeling from the enormity of what she had said. A part of him wanted to laugh—a harsh, unbelieving sound. Another part wanted to curl back into the hollow of stone and pretend none of this existed.

“How is this possible?” he whispered. “I am nothing. I don’t remember... anything.”

Ayathra stepped closer, her movements graceful yet deliberate.

“I am of the spirit and the flesh, the seer and the seeker,” she said. “As are you, Cro. In time, you will understand.”

He was not sure he wanted to.

Ayathra studied him in silence for a long moment, her eyes seeming to look past skin and bone into something deeper. When she spoke again, her voice shifted—no longer simple speech, but song.

The Prophecy

“I will tell you of dawn,

How the stars whisper to creation.

Your name is etched not in stone,

But in the shifting sands of destiny.

You are not the end but the thread,

Binding the light and the dark.

The Veil trembles, and with it, you rise,

Not as beast or man, but as both.”

Her words enveloped him, weaving a tapestry of foreboding and promise.

Cro felt the weight of her gaze and a faint tremor of understanding stirring within him, like a bird beating its wings against the bars of a cage he did not yet see.

His throat tightened. “I don’t want to be a thread,” he murmured. “I only just learned how to breathe.”

Eryon’s cry broke the spell.

The eagle spread his wings and took flight, soaring toward the Veil of Time. Ayathra watched him for a heartbeat, then turned back to Cro, her eyes shining with quiet determination.

“Come,” she said. “The Veil awaits.”

They descended into the valley. Grass brushed Cro’s legs with each unsteady step. The air grew cooler, the light around them thickening as they approached the shimmering boundary. The Veil rose before them like a vertical river of liquid light, its surface rippling with colors he had no names for.

Ayathra reached out, her hand brushing against the barrier. Light clung to her skin, running along her fingers like water. The golden eagle circled above them, its presence a beacon of courage.

Cro swallowed. “If I step through... what happens to me?”

“You become more fully what you already are,” Ayathra said. “And you see what ordinary eyes cannot.”

“That does not sound comforting,” he muttered.

A small, almost amused curve touched her lips. “It is not meant to be. Destiny rarely is.”

She extended her hand to him again. “Together,” she said.

Cro stared at the Veil. Every instinct screamed to stay on this side, where the grass was real beneath his feet and the air filled his lungs in familiar pain. But that same deep pull that had driven him to shatter his stone prison now tugged him forward.

He took her hand.

With a sudden surge of motion, Ayathra and Cro pushed through the Veil together.

The world exploded into light and shadow—a storm of creation swirling around them. Colors he had never seen and sounds he had never heard tore through him. The sensation was too much—like being turned inside out and scattered across the sky.

Cro fell.

The force of the passage threw him against jagged rocks. Pain seared through him as blood warmed the cold stone beneath his back. Dazed, he blinked up into the swirling brilliance.

Ayathra stood over him.

The feathers that had adorned her body began to dissolve into light, drifting away like embers on an unseen wind. As the radiance faded, her fully human form emerged—skin glowing with the warmth of the sun, dark hair a cascade of locs that shimmered with the luster of twilight.

“You are reborn,” she said, her voice soft but unwavering. “As am I.”

The golden eagle landed beside her, talons scraping stone, its radiant gaze fixed on Cro.

“The Sentinel of Sight has chosen you,” Ayathra continued. “Through Eryon, I see beyond the edges of time. And through you, the threads of destiny will be made whole.”

Cro’s breath hitched.

Visions flooded his mind: a crown of gold and crimson, bound by a fabric of stars; a vast tapestry where time unraveled and rewove itself endlessly; a land of hills and rivers he somehow knew, choked one moment with chains and the next washed clean in light. Above it all, a name whispered by the cosmos: Chronarch.

The word settled into him like a seed dropped into newly broken ground.

“I don’t know how to be that,” he whispered, though he was not sure if the words left his mouth or only echoed in his mind.

Darkness crept in at the edges of his vision.

As it closed over him, Cro's dreams were filled with the eagle's cry—sharp, insistent, eternal—a voice that would not let him forget the destiny he had yet to fulfill.

4

THE SACRED TETHER



Through the weaving of the seasons, Cro never loosened his grasp on Ayathra, their love a sacred tether entwined with the fabric of existence itself. Morning arrived in soft hues of lavender and gold, the horizon whispering remnants of the night's stars.

The final glimmers seemed to linger, caught between the embrace of twilight and dawn.

A gentle breeze carried the scent of blooming wildflowers, mingling with the earthy richness of the land. The first birds began their tentative calls, heralding the arrival of a new day. Shadows stretched long and soft across the ground, fading as sunlight spilled over the hills, painting the earth in a warm, golden glow.

Cro lay beneath the open sky, his dark, sinewy form blending seamlessly with the dew-kissed grass. His heart beat in quiet harmony with the world, his essence tethered to both earth and sky through the profound love he bore for Ayathra. The early air was cool against his skin, carrying the faint aroma of damp earth and the sweetness of wildflowers.

He stirred as he felt movement beside him.

Turning, his dark eyes softened at the sight of Ayathra lying next to him. The sun's rays struck her skin at an angle, highlighting her dark complexion, rich like mahogany and fresh earth, as though creation itself honored her presence. She stretched out across the grass, the blades cool and slightly damp beneath her, their tips glistening with morning dew. Her eyes fluttered open, and before she spoke, a smile played on her lips.

"Good morning," she said, her voice a melody that seemed to harmonize with the gentle hum of the distant brook.

"It is," Cro replied, his gaze never leaving her face. He leaned over and placed a soft kiss on her forehead, a silent promise of his devotion. In these moments, he felt he had never been so blessed. The quiet serenity of their bond filled him with a depth of love he could scarcely comprehend.

Ayathra propped herself up against a smooth stone, her movements imbued with effortless grace. Her presence carried a majesty that reminded Cro of the raw, unyielding power she held within her. Though she seldom revealed her full strength, her mere existence was a testament to it. She rested her head on her hands and gazed at him with an enigmatic smile.

"Do you know what day this is?" she asked. "It is not merely a day marked by the amber sky; it is a moment whispered through the ages, a turning point known to those who listen to the pulse of the earth."

Cro's eyes flicked to the horizon, where the amber light of dawn spilled over the landscape. "The sky has been unusually amber today," he said, "which means it is the First Day of the Seven Suns."

Ayathra nodded, her expression mysterious. "It is deeper than that, my love."

"Oh?" Cro asked, curiosity stirring.

She reached for his hands, her touch grounding him. "Before you ever came to be, I was," she said softly. "I have traveled the course of this land in search of something, and then I found you. When your spirit called me through the rocks, I chose you as both my friend and my eternal love."

Her fingers guided his hands to her stomach. Her eyes glistened with an emotion he could not yet name.

"In the depths of my belly grows the tree of life," she whispered. "It speaks of its existence with a small, still voice."

Cro's heart swelled, though he could not fully comprehend her words. He looked at her in wonder. "What does it mean?"

Ayathra's laughter, rich and melodious, rang out like the chiming of a thousand bells. Her locs danced as amusement rippled through her.

"We are going to have a child," she said, her smile illuminating the space between them.

Cro's joy was boundless. He wrapped her in his embrace.

"A child?" he murmured, his voice trembling with awe.

He placed his ear against her stomach, as though the universe itself might sing to him. And in that moment, he heard it—a faint hum, ancient and eternal, a melody that resonated with the rhythm of creation itself.

As the day unfolded beneath the shade of the trees, Cro lay with his head on Ayathra's stomach, listening for the voice of their child. A soft

warmth stirred within him, as though the hum from her womb echoed the heartbeat of the earth. For the first time, he felt profoundly connected to something greater than himself. Ayathra's breath beneath his cheek rose and fell like the rhythm of the land, grounding him even as his spirit soared.

Ayathra's voice broke the stillness, her tone now serious.

"There is much that you should know," she said. "For the safety of the child, I must be alone. Every mother must embark on the journey to the top of Eshavel and stay there for a time. When the eastern sun unfurls, only then can I return."

Cro's chest tightened. "I cannot bear to be apart from you," he said, his voice laced with quiet anguish.

Ayathra's gaze softened, her fingers tracing the lines of his face. "You will never be apart from us," she replied. "Once our child is born, I will come back down to see you."

Cro traced a finger along her cheek, memorizing every contour of her skin. "I will wait for you," he said. "Please do not forget me."

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "You mean everything to me, Cro. How could I forget you? It is you who brought love to my lonely existence. You, who watered the vines I didn't know could grow inside of me."

She leaned forward, and their lips lingered in a kiss that spoke of promises and eternity.

When she pulled away, she closed her eyes and stretched her arms outward.

The ground beneath them shifted, the air thick with energy. A golden light enveloped her, surrounding her like an aura of transformation. Sparks of luminescence danced like fireflies, illuminating the space with ethereal hues. Cro shielded his eyes as the transformation unfolded, the earth itself rumbling in witness.

When the light dimmed, she stood taller, her presence emanating power and grace. Her eyes, those dark, piercing orbs, reflected the infinite cosmos.

Ayathra's expression softened as she turned toward the mountain.

With a final glance, she began her ascent, her silhouette gradually fading into the mist-veiled Eshavel. A single thread from her garment floated downward, carried by a breeze that seemed to sigh with her absence.

Cro caught it gently, cradling it as though it held the weight of her soul. With trembling hands, he wove it into his hair—a silent vow to wait, no matter the cost.

His eyes lifted to the mist-veiled Eshavel, and he whispered, "I will wait for you, Ayathra. Until the stars themselves are no more."



5

ESH'AVEL

Two moons hung in the sky above Eshavel, their pale glow reflecting off the crystalline plateau. The air shimmered with an otherworldly hum, the echoes of the Creator's design resonating through the land. Ayathra had dwelled here for many months, weaving her songs into the unborn child who stirred within her. Her every breath carried the weight of her lineage, her every step echoed the balance she had been tasked to protect.

Eshavel was unlike any other place on the earth. A vast expanse of smooth, glimmering stone stretched outward, cradled by jagged peaks that pierced the heavens. The light of the moons transformed its surface into a river of silver, its edges flecked with violet where starlight kissed the stone. The air was cool but heavy, laden with the whispers of the ancient ones who had walked this path before her.

Each day, Ayathra rose before dawn, her voice carrying through the stillness. Her songs were woven with the secrets of her kind, passed down through the ages. They spoke of unity and division, of light and shadow, and of the Creator's eternal plan. These melodies were not

merely lullabies for the child; they were threads in the great tapestry of existence.

A Sacred Ritual

Every evening, she bathed in the sacred waters of the Ancestral River, its surface shimmering with faint, golden ripples that seemed to echo the heartbeat of the earth itself. The river was fed by cascading falls that plummeted from unseen heights, their thundering presence both a comfort and a reminder of the power that sustained this land.

She envisioned herself soaring above Eshavel, her soul unbound, a guardian watching over the sacred grounds. Her sharp gaze reflected the unyielding focus of her spirit, her movements deliberate and precise, as though her very steps were guided by the winds of fate.

But even in this sanctuary, unease crept into her heart.

The skies above Eshavel had grown darker in recent days, the light of the moons dimmed by an unseen force. Her instincts whispered warnings—faint but insistent—urging vigilance.

The Arrival of Surok

As the sun climbed higher, the stillness of the plateau was shattered by the sound of footsteps.

Ayathra opened her eyes, her heart pounding as her senses stretched outward. The whispers of her intuition sharpened into a piercing certainty.

Emerging from the shadows of the jagged peaks was Surok.

His copper skin gleamed like molten metal, and his golden locs shimmered with an internal fire. His copper eyes burned with an intensity that sent a chill racing through her veins.

“Surok,” she said, rising to her feet. Her voice was steady, but her fingers clenched the edge of her robe. “What brings you to Eshavel?”

He halted, his towering form radiating a quiet but palpable authority. For a moment, the presence within him seemed to prowl at the edges of his being, its intensity almost tangible.

“Ayathra,” he rumbled, his voice deep and resonant, “your child’s song has reached even the farthest edges of the realm.”

Her jaw tightened. “Her song is not yours to claim.”

Surok stepped closer, his lips curling into a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“The firstborn of your kind belongs to us,” he said. “It is the law, sealed in blood long ago.”

“That law was a distortion, twisted by your pride,” Ayathra spat. “We answer only to the Creator.”

Surok’s laugh was low and mocking. “The Creator may have given you life, but it was we who secured your future. You exist because we allowed it.”

“You speak of allowance,” she retorted, her eyes narrowing, “yet you stand here as one who has defied the Creator’s will.”

Surok’s smile faded, his expression hardening. “Defiance is a matter of perspective, Ayathra. Your lineage owes its very existence to the covenant. Deny it all you wish, but the child within you belongs to me.”

Her hand slipped protectively over her belly. “She belongs to no one but the Creator.”

A Clash of Spirits

Surok’s hand twitched, his posture tightening as though preparing to strike.

With a sudden burst of speed, he lunged toward her, his hand reaching for her throat.

Ayathra's spirit surged, her resolve blazing to life. A brilliant golden light erupted from her being, forcing him to recoil. Her presence seemed to fill the air, commanding and unyielding.

"Stay back," she commanded, her voice carrying the weight of generations.

Surok staggered, his copper eyes narrowing with fury. "You cannot protect her forever. If she crosses my path, I will claim her."

Ayathra stepped forward, her hands trembling but her resolve unshaken. "She will never know your shadow, Surok. I swear it."

"Swear it upon the honor of your ancestors," he demanded, his voice a growl.

Ayathra hesitated, the sacred oath weighing heavily upon her. Slowly, she reached for the pendant around her neck, holding it aloft. Its glow dimmed, a reflection of the sacrifice she was making.

"Leave this place and never return," she said, her voice steady. "I swear by the honor of those who came before me: you will never lay claim to my firstborn."

Surok studied her, his smile returning but laced with menace.

"For now," he said, before vanishing into the shadows, the air collapsing inward where he had stood.

Reunion with Cro

The encounter left Ayathra shaking.

She knelt on the cold stone, her hands cradling her belly. The child stirred within her, its song rising faintly—a melody of hope and defiance.

"You are my light," she whispered, tears streaming down her face. "My reason to endure."

When the sun dipped below the horizon, she descended Eshavel. The path was long and treacherous, the air growing heavier with each step. Her legs ached, but the need to reach Cro pulled her forward.

She found him beneath the ancient banyan tree, his hands pressed into the soil as if drawing strength from the earth. The sight of him steadied her heart, even as the burden of her revelation loomed over her.

“Ayathra,” he called, rising to meet her. His joy at seeing her was evident, but his expression shifted to concern as he noticed her unease. “What’s wrong?”

She took his hands, her eyes locking with his. “There is something you must know.”

Cro’s brow furrowed. “What is it?”

“Surok,” she said, her voice trembling. “He claims our child as his. He demands the firstborn of our kind.”

Rage flared in Cro’s eyes, his grip tightening around her hands. “No one will take our child,” he said. “Not while I live.”

“We must protect her,” Ayathra said, her voice steadying as she heard his conviction. “Together.”

The Birth of Raine

Beneath the banyan tree, as the rains fell softly, Ayathra gave birth.

Cro held their daughter in his arms, his eyes shining with wonder.

“We will call her Raine,” Ayathra said, her voice soft but resolute. “For she is both the storm and the calm.”

Together, they vowed to protect their daughter, even as Surok’s shadow loomed in the distance—a dark reminder of the trials yet to come.

6

RAINE'S ASCENSION

The first light of dawn filtered through the dense canopy of trees, casting a soft golden glow over the clearing at the base of Eshavel. Raine sat on the porch of their modest home, her legs curled beneath her, gazing at the awakening world. The morning air carried a melody familiar and ancient, a song that seemed to rise from Eshavel itself. It was the same song she had dreamed of since childhood, calling her to something greater.

Inside, Ayathra moved with quiet grace. Her presence filled the room like the aura of the eagle spirit she embodied. Though her features were human, her piercing golden eyes, sharp cheekbones, and feather-like markings along her arms and shoulders gave her an ethereal air. She paused in the doorway, watching her daughter with a mixture of pride and apprehension.

Raine, though fully human, carried her own eagle-like qualities: a sharp, curious gaze, a preternatural agility, and a bond with the skies through the majestic eagle that had been her companion since birth.

The creature, named Auren, was perched nearby, its massive form silhouetted against the morning light.

“Raine,” Ayathra called softly, her voice like a breeze stirring the trees.

Raine turned, her dark eyes alight with expectation. “Is it time?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

Ayathra stepped onto the porch and rested a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “Eshavel has called you,” she said. “Today, you begin to understand your place in the great design.”

Raine’s heart pounded. This was the moment she had dreamed of, yet doubt whispered at the edges of her excitement. *Am I truly ready?*

She swallowed and nodded.

A Father’s Blessing

Inside the house, Cro was already awake, tending to the fire. The scent of smoldering wood mingled with the earthy aroma of morning dew. Cro—a towering figure with broad shoulders and a mane of dark, untamed hair—turned as they entered. His lion-like golden eyes softened, a blend of pride and sadness reflected in his expression.

“So,” he said, his deep voice steady, “the time has come.”

Raine stepped into his embrace, her cheek resting against the warmth of his chest. “I’ll be back soon,” she said, though her voice wavered slightly.

Cro pulled back, his hands firm on her shoulders. “Remember,” he said, “no matter where this journey takes you, you are loved. Your mother and I will always be here for you.”

Ayathra watched the exchange, her heart full yet heavy. Cro had always been their anchor, grounding her flight and guiding their family. Now, as Raine prepared for her destiny, Ayathra felt the weight of the future pressing upon them all.

Cro turned to Ayathra, his eyes meeting hers. He leaned down to kiss her forehead, lingering as if imparting a part of himself to her before they left.

“Take care of her,” he murmured.

“I will,” Ayathra promised, though she knew this journey belonged to Raine alone.

The Flight to Eshavel

Outside, the morning air was crisp and alive with the calls of waking birds. Auren spread his massive wings, the sunlight glinting off his golden feathers. Raine approached him, her hand brushing his neck as their bond pulsed between them. Auren’s intelligent eyes met hers, and she knew he understood the importance of the day.

Ayathra stepped forward, her movements deliberate. Though she no longer transformed as effortlessly as she once had in her youth, the eagle spirit’s essence remained in every motion. She placed a hand on Auren’s side, murmuring a soft blessing.

Raine climbed onto Auren’s back, the familiar sensation of his feathers beneath her hands filling her with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. With a powerful beat of his wings, they took to the sky, Ayathra soaring beside them on a smaller eagle of her own.

The world unfolded below them in breathtaking splendor. Rivers wound through emerald valleys, forests stretched to the horizon, and their village, nestled against Eshavel’s base, seemed to glow in the morning light. The wind rushed past Raine’s face, carrying with it the promise of something greater.

As they ascended, the air grew thinner, the sky deepening into an otherworldly blue. The summit of Eshavel rose before them, a crown of fire and stone. Auren landed gracefully on a wide ledge, and Raine dismounted, her legs unsteady from the flight.

“This is where it begins,” Ayathra said, her voice imbued with gravity.

The Song of Eshavel

The summit was stark and beautiful, its jagged rocks glinting with veins of crystal. The air seemed to hum with an energy that resonated deep within Raine’s bones.

“How do we ascend further?” Raine asked, noticing no visible path to the peak of Eshavel.

Ayathra knelt before her, taking her hands. “You must sing the song of your birth,” she said. “It is the key that unlocks the veil.”

Raine hesitated. “But I don’t know the song.”

“You do,” Ayathra assured her. “It is woven into your being. Close your eyes and listen. The melody will come.”

Raine closed her eyes, shutting out the world. For a moment there was only silence—and then, from somewhere deep within, a hum began to rise. Tentative at first, it grew stronger, shaping itself into a melody that felt both new and impossibly old.

Ayathra joined her, their voices weaving together in harmony. The sound wrapped around them, threads of tone binding earth, sky, and spirit.

Eshavel responded.

The air shimmered as their song filled the space. Light burst forth, wrapping them in radiance. The ground beneath their feet shifted, and they began to rise, carried by an unseen force. The veil parted, revealing a world of breathtaking beauty.

The Tower of the Oracles

The realm beyond the veil defied description.

Rivers of liquid light flowed through valleys of crystalline grass. Trees with iridescent leaves stretched toward a sky that pulsed with color. Ahead, the Tower of the Oracles rose, its spires piercing the

heavens. Its surface shimmered as if alive, etched with symbols that glowed and shifted like living script.

“This is the sanctum,” Ayathra said as they approached. “It is where the Oracles of the Veil gather—and where I have served for centuries.”

Inside, the air was thick with power. Glyphs floated like fireflies, drifting through the chamber. The walls hummed with an ancient song Raine could feel more than hear, vibrating in her bones.

Ayathra led her to the center of the room, where a circle of light awaited.

“Step into the light,” Ayathra instructed. “This is the first step in your journey.”

The Encounter with the Divine

Raine stepped into the circle. Warmth surged around her, enfolding her in a radiant embrace. The Tower dissolved from her senses, replaced by an endless expanse of stars.

She floated in the vastness, weightless and small.

A voice, deep and resonant, spoke her name.

“Raine, daughter of Ayathra, child of destiny—welcome.”

She fell to her knees, overwhelmed by the presence pressing in on every side.

“The wisdom of the universe flows through your veins,” the voice continued. “Guard it well, for it is both a gift and a burden.”

A vision unfolded before her: a city of gold and crystal, alive with light. At its center stood a great tree, its branches stretching into eternity, dripping with fruits that glowed like captured suns.

“This is the future,” the voice said. “A place prepared for your people. You will guide them here, but the path is fraught with shadows.”

Raine’s heart hammered. The weight of the vision pressed against her chest, but beneath the fear, something resolute stirred.

“I will,” she vowed, tears streaming down her face. “I will not turn away.”

The stars flared, and the vision dissolved.

A Changed Daughter

When Raine emerged from the light, she glowed with an inner radiance. Ayathra rushed forward and embraced her, feeling the shift in her daughter’s spirit.

“You are different,” Ayathra said, her voice filled with awe.

“I have seen what lies ahead,” Raine replied quietly. “And I will never be the same.”

When they returned to the village, Cro immediately noticed the transformation. He held his daughter tightly, whispering words of love and encouragement. Her presence felt both familiar and somehow expanded, as if the air around her had learned a new name.

Raine shared pieces of her journey—her ascent, the song, the Tower—while guarding the vision of the golden city as her sacred duty. Some things, she knew, were meant to unfold in their own time.

In the days that followed, Raine’s connection to the divine deepened. Her dreams grew sharper. Her prayers carried more weight. Though shadows loomed on the horizon, she walked with her head held high, the echo of that voice still ringing in her spirit:

A gift and a burden.

She carried both.

7

RAINE'S REBELLION

The Still Night

The night was unnervingly still, the hum of Eshavel muted, as though the earth itself held its breath. Ayathra stood at the edge of the forest, her silver-streaked hair gleaming faintly in the moonlight. Her piercing gaze swept across the horizon, her fingers clutching a pendant etched with an eagle in flight—a relic of her Seer's mantle.

Her breath came in shallow waves as her mind slipped past the barriers of time, into the shimmering threads of possibility.

The vision was clearer this time.

Jagged images wove themselves into painful clarity: a golden light, a young girl engulfed in fire, and a piercing roar that shook the heavens.

“No,” Ayathra whispered, trembling. She pressed her hand to her temple, but the vision refused to fade. The threads of time felt like chains, unyielding and suffocating.

“Raine,” she murmured, her daughter's name heavy with grief.

The weight of what she had seen was unbearable. Even as she prayed she was wrong, a sharp pang in her chest told her otherwise.

Raine's Rebellion

The hut was silent, the warm glow of moonlight filtering through the woven reeds. Raine crouched low, her fingers brushing the soft feathers of her eagle, Auren. Her parents' forms were faintly visible in the shadows, their rhythmic breathing steady and deep.

Her mother's warnings echoed in her mind.

The sky is dangerous, Raine. You are not ready. Stay grounded where it is safe.

But the sky called to her louder tonight than ever before.

She met Auren's sharp eyes, the bond between them unspoken but undeniable. The eagle's wings twitched, as though sensing her resolve.

"We'll prove them wrong," she whispered, stroking his sleek feathers.

Her heart raced as she rose and stepped into the clearing. The cool grass beneath her feet grounded her for a moment, but the pull of the heavens was stronger.

Auren spread his massive wings, their silver-gold sheen catching the moonlight. With a powerful leap, he launched into the air, his talons gripping the leather strap around Raine's waist. Together, they ascended, the rush of wind pulling at her hair as the earth fell away beneath them.

The stars seemed closer now, brighter, their light a melody threading through her thoughts. Higher and higher they climbed, her laughter bubbling up—a joyous sound that rang out against the stillness.

Then, near the summit of Eshavel, she saw it: a ripple in the sky.

It shimmered like a golden wound, its edges alive with fire. It pulsed, drawing her closer.

Ayathra's Warning

Ayathra bolted upright, her vision snapping back to the present. Her chest heaved as though she had run for miles. The pendant in her hands burned against her skin.

She ran to Cro, who worked by the dim glow of a torch outside their hut.

"Cro!" she gasped. "It's Raine. She's gone."

Cro looked up sharply, setting his tools aside. His movements carried the grace of a leopard, every step calculated and swift.

"What do you mean, gone?" he asked, his voice low and controlled.

"She's in the sky," Ayathra said, her voice cracking. "I told her not to, but... Surrok is there. I saw it in the threads."

Cro's jaw tightened, his expression darkening. He grabbed his staff and turned toward the trees without another word, his strides swift and purposeful.

Surrok's Wrath

Raine and Auren ascended, the air growing colder as they neared the summit. The ripple shimmered ahead, its golden light brightening the night. Auren's wings faltered for a moment, his instincts warning of danger.

"We're almost there," Raine urged, her voice steady despite the tremor in her chest. She leaned forward, urging him onward.

Then the ripple became a roar.

A blast of golden fire erupted before them, blinding in its intensity. From its core emerged Surrok, his mane-like hair glowing like molten gold, his copper eyes burning with fury. His broad shoulders and towering frame exuded power, and the heat around him shimmered like a living flame.

“You dare to rise,” Surrok growled, his voice a low rumble that resonated in Raine’s bones. “Child of the earth, you defy the will of the sky.”

Auren screeched, circling defensively as Surrok’s gaze bore into them. Raine gripped the leather strap tighter, her heart pounding.

“I only wanted to fly,” she said, her voice trembling.

Surrok’s laughter rumbled like distant thunder. “You were warned. Yet here you are, reaching for what is not yours to claim.”

“I am my mother’s daughter,” Raine said, her voice growing steadier. “The sky is my birthright.”

Surrok’s roar tore through the air. Flames erupted around him, searing the night. The heat struck Auren; his feathers singed as he screamed, his wings faltering.

They plummeted, the golden light consuming the dark.

The Aftermath

Cro reached the base of Eshavel first. The trees opened to reveal jagged rocks strewn with ash. In the dim light of the approaching dawn, he saw her.

Raine’s broken body lay cradled in the roots of an ancient tree, Auren’s charred feathers scattered around her.

Cro dropped to his knees, his fingers trembling as he gathered her lifeless form into his arms. His tears fell silently, mingling with the ash that covered her.

Ayathra arrived moments later, her face pale and stricken. She stopped a few feet away, her trembling hands reaching out, then falling to her sides.

“She was just a child,” Cro murmured, his voice thick with grief.

Ayathra's tears fell silently. "I should have told her everything," she whispered. "I should have prepared her."

"You warned her," Cro said bitterly, his gaze fixed on their daughter. "But she was too much like us. Too much like you."

Ayathra turned her gaze skyward. The faint glow of Surrok's light still lingered on the horizon.

"This is not the end," she said softly, her voice heavy with both sorrow and resolve.

Eagle's Farewell

At dawn, Ayathra ascended to the peak of Eshavel. She carried Raine's ashes in a simple vessel, her steps slow and deliberate. One of Auren's remaining feathers was tied to the vessel, a tribute to the bond they had shared.

At the summit, she held the vessel aloft.

"From the sky, you came," she whispered, her voice breaking. "To the sky, you return."

She scattered the ashes into the wind, watching as they danced and disappeared into the light.

Removing a single feather from her pendant, she cast it into the air. The feather caught the wind, rising high before bursting into a cascade of golden sparks. The sky seemed to darken in mourning.

As Ayathra descended, a weight settled over her. She had left behind not just Raine, but a part of herself—the eagle she once was.

The Birth of Ole

Months later, Ayathra stood once again at the base of Eshavel, her hand resting on her swollen belly. Cro knelt beside her, his fingers brushing the earth as he whispered a quiet prayer.

“I feel her spirit,” Ayathra said, her voice soft but steady. “Raine’s light... it hasn’t left us.”

When Ole was born, the rain fell gently, wrapping the land in a silver mist.



8

LEGACY OF ESH'AVEL

To the east of Eshavel lay the village, a sprawl of wooden huts capped with slender reed roofs. The air was alive with the sounds of life—children laughing as they chased one another through the trees, the gentle murmur of water from the well, and the low hum of men’s voices as they sat under the ancient banyan tree, exchanging stories.

The village, born of the first nails driven into stone by Cro’s hands, had grown into a sanctuary. Its people thrived beneath the watchful gaze of Eshavel, their lives a testament to resilience and unity. Cro had built this place long ago as a home for Ayathra, and over time, their love had rooted itself in the land, sprouting a family and a thriving community.

Cro often wandered among the villagers unnoticed, his presence an unassuming but steady assurance.

“The mighty Cro can shift the moon with a flick of his wrist,” the elders would say, passing tales to wide-eyed children.

“Father Cro carved the rivers and taught the trees to sing,” others added, their voices filled with reverence.

Cro smiled at the embellishments, never correcting them.

A Father’s Craft

This morning, Cro sat under a grove of old oak trees, sunlight dappling the ground around him. His hammer rested heavily in his hand, its worn handle a companion to years of labor. Before him lay a metallic sheet, its surface etched with careful lines that resembled the intricate spots of a leopard.

He struck the metal cleanly, the rhythmic sound reverberating through the grove. It was soothing—a melody of creation. Today’s work was special: he was crafting a gift for Ayathra, a symbol of the legacy they had built together.

As he lifted the hammer again, a shadow flitted through the trees. He lowered his tool and glanced toward it, his lips curling into a smile.

“Ole, you can come out. I see you.”

The shadow hesitated, then stepped forward to reveal his youngest daughter. Her dark curls framed a face full of curiosity and mischief, her brown eyes sparkling as they met his.

“You’re up early,” she said, brushing a stray leaf from her tunic.

Cro’s grin widened. “Perhaps you’re the one who slept in.”

Ole wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think so.”

She approached him, her small hand resting on his forearm as she peered at the workspace.

“What are you making?”

“A gift for your mother,” Cro replied, gesturing to the half-finished sheet. “Something to honor all she’s given us.”

Ole tilted her head, thoughtful. “Is it her birthday?”

“No,” Cro said, his voice softening. “It’s something more. A reminder of where we’ve been and where we’re going.”

Ole's brow furrowed. "Does she need reminding?"

Cro chuckled, setting the hammer aside. "Not really. But it's good to have something that lasts—something that tells our story long after words fade."

Ole sat cross-legged beside him, her small hands clasped under her chin. "Will you tell me the story, too?"

Cro paused, studying her. Her dark eyes brimmed with curiosity and something deeper—a hunger to understand.

"Of course," he said, reaching for a stick. "But it's a long story, and you'll have to listen closely."

"I always listen," Ole said, puffing out her chest.

"Then pay attention," Cro teased, drawing a circle in the dirt.

As he moved the stick, the shapes came alive, catching the light as if they shimmered on their own.

The Story of Creation

"In the beginning," Cro began, "there was only Light and Eshavel. From them, the world was born. The fire that created the first spark was no ordinary flame—it was a song."

Ole's eyes widened as the shapes in the dirt shifted, the drawn fire seeming to flicker before her.

"Light sang the notes," Cro continued, "and Eshavel wove them into the earth. Together, they formed a mountain that would hold the balance of all things. From its peak, the divine spoke, setting time and life into motion."

The lines in the dirt swirled into the shape of a towering peak, its summit piercing the heavens.

"But not all was well," Cro said, his tone darkening. "For even as life grew, shadows formed. The people who walked the land forgot the song. They carved the mountain's flesh, burned its trees, and drank its rivers dry. Eshavel wept, her heart breaking for her children."

“Why didn’t she stop them?” Ole asked, her voice trembling.

Cro glanced at her, his face solemn. “Because she loved them, even when they forgot her,” he said. “She hoped they would remember—that they would see her beauty and care for it. It was a risk she gave them as a gift: the choice to remember or to forget.”

Ole frowned, her fingers tracing the lines of the circle. “Did they ever remember?”

Cro smiled faintly. “Some did,” he said. “That’s why we tell these stories, Ole. To remind ourselves, and each other, of what we can become.”

A Family’s Promise

Cro’s hands returned to the metallic sheet, his tools carving intricate patterns into its surface. Ole watched him work, her mind turning over the story.

“Father,” she said suddenly, “do you think I’ll ever make something like that?”

Cro paused, glancing at her. “Like this gift?”

Ole nodded. “Something that tells a story.”

Cro set down his tools and reached for her hand.

“You already are, Ole,” he said. “Every word you speak, every choice you make—it’s part of your story. And one day, you’ll tell it in ways I can’t even imagine.”

Ole’s cheeks flushed, but she smiled. “Will you help me?”

“Always,” Cro said, his voice warm. “That’s what fathers are for.”

Ayathra’s Return

The sound of footsteps drew their attention. Ayathra appeared at the edge of the grove, her silver-streaked hair catching the sunlight. Her sharp, discerning eyes scanned the scene, her movements as graceful and deliberate as an eagle in flight. She carried a woven basket,

its contents hidden beneath a cloth patterned with intricate designs resembling feathers.

“Cro,” she called, her voice melodic. “Dinner’s ready.”

Cro set his tools aside and stood, dusting off his hands. “Perfect timing,” he said. “I was just telling Ole the story of Eshavel.”

Ayathra’s gaze softened as she approached. “And did you listen well, little one?”

Ole beamed. “I did! Father says I’ll tell my own story one day.”

Ayathra knelt beside her, brushing a curl from her face. “You already are, my love,” she said. “And I can’t wait to hear it.”

Together, they walked back toward the village, the sounds of laughter and life wrapping around them like a warm embrace. Overhead, an eagle circled—Auren’s descendant—its cry splitting the air as it soared toward the horizon.

As the sun dipped below the edge of the world, the light caught the metallic sheet Cro had left behind beneath the oaks, its surface glinting with the promise of a legacy still unfolding.



9

EBELE

The village buzzed with life as the sun hung high in the sky. Children darted through the square, their laughter rising like the song of birds. Sticks clattered in rhythmic games, their movements an unspoken language Ebele couldn't decipher.

He leaned against the weathered frame of the hut, his slender fingers brushing its grooves. The wood, smoothed by countless hands, was his anchor as he watched from the edges—unseen, but not unnoticed. Every shout of joy, every burst of running feet tugged at him and pushed him away at the same time.

He wanted to join them, to shake loose the tight coil of anxiety in his chest. But the thought of stepping forward felt as impossible as lifting the entire Bengata.

What if I stumble? What if I ruin their game? What if they look at me the way they did when Father's body came home?

The questions gnawed at him.

Behind him, his mother's soft voice broke the quiet. "Ebele."

He turned to see Asata, her silhouette framed by the sunlight. Her braided hair glinted gold where it caught the light, and her steady gaze seemed to penetrate the walls he'd built around himself.

"You've been here all morning," she said, approaching with quiet grace. "Why don't you go and play with them?"

Ebele lowered his eyes, scuffing the dirt with his foot. "I don't want to."

It wasn't entirely a lie. Wanting and *being able* felt like two different worlds.

She studied him for a long moment, her face softening. "You spend too much time alone," she said, her voice tinged with worry. "Your father and brothers... they'd want you to find joy, even if they can't be here to see it."

The mention of them pressed against an old bruise. Ten chairs once crowded their cooking fire; now there were two. He swallowed.

"I couldn't leave you here by yourself," he offered. The words were as much an excuse as they were the truth. If he was watching her, if he was useful, it meant fewer chances for loss to sneak in.

Her laughter was gentle, a balm to his uncertainty. She reached out, brushing a hand over his dark curls.

"You're a good boy, Ebele. But you don't have to carry my burdens. That's my job."

His shoulders loosened under her touch, though the weight in his chest lingered.

"Do you need anything?" he asked, eager to redirect the conversation, to be needed again.

"I was about to gather firewood," she said, her voice shifting back to practicality.

"I'll do it." His response was quick, his resolve firm. "I'll be back before you even notice I'm gone."

She hesitated, then nodded, a small smile curving her lips. “Alright. But don’t wander too far. We’ll need to start dinner soon.”

He nodded, gripping the axe a little too tightly as he turned toward the trees.

Duty, he understood. Duty was safer than games.

Into the Forest

The woods swallowed Ebele whole, its cool embrace a refuge from the noise of the village. The earthy scent of moss and pine filled the air, grounding him. Here, surrounded by towering trees and shifting patches of sunlight, he could breathe without feeling watched.

The axe felt heavier in his hand as he ventured deeper, but his thoughts grew lighter with each step. The hum of the forest—the rustle of leaves, the distant call of birds—was a rhythm he could move with, unlike the quick, unpredictable dance of village games.

Out here, no one expected him to laugh at the right moment or speak without stumbling. Trees didn’t ask questions.

He reached a small clearing and slowed, choosing a fallen branch he could break down later. As he folded his fingers around the wood, a figure stepped into view, startling him.

It was a girl.

Her dress, a deep red that stood out against the green of the forest, swayed with her steps. Her hair, braided with golden threads, shimmered in the dappled light. She seemed to belong to the forest and yet apart from it, her presence both magnetic and unnerving.

She caught his gaze and smiled, her expression sharp and knowing.

“Why are you always staring at me?” she asked.

Ebele’s grip tightened on the axe, and his cheeks flushed. “I’m not,” he muttered, though the words felt hollow even to him.

The girl laughed, the sound light and teasing. “You’re a terrible liar. What’s your name?”

“Ebele,” he said, barely above a whisper.

She stepped closer, her confidence unsettling. “I’m Ole.”

Her name fell from his lips before he could stop himself, soft as a prayer. “Ole.”

Her smile widened, a flicker of amusement in her dark eyes. “I’ve seen you before,” she said. “You’re always watching, but you never talk to anyone.”

Ebele looked away, embarrassed. “I’m not good at talking.”

Ole shrugged, unbothered. “Maybe you don’t need to talk much. But you’re here now. Where are you going?”

“Firewood,” he answered, gesturing to the axe.

“Then I’ll come with you,” she said, already moving to join him.

Ebele blinked, caught off guard. “Why would you want to?”

“Because I want to,” she said simply. “Or are you going to stop me?”

For a heartbeat, he considered refusing. This was his safe place, his quiet. But the thought of telling someone *no* to their face made his stomach twist almost as much as joining the games did.

He shook his head. “No. I’m not going to stop you.”

A Shared Path

They walked in silence at first, their footsteps crunching against the forest floor. Ebele kept his gaze forward, still unsure what to make of the strange girl who had so easily inserted herself into his day.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” Ole asked at last.

Ebele shook his head, a faint smile tugging at his lips despite himself.

“Well,” Ole continued, undeterred, “I’ll do the talking, then. Tell me about your family.”

“I’m the youngest of ten,” he said after a pause.

Ole let out a low whistle. “Ten? That’s a lot of brothers and sisters.”

Ebele nodded. “They’re all gone now. My father too.”

Her teasing expression softened. "I'm sorry."

"It's just me and my mother now," he added, his voice quieter. "She's all I have."

Ole studied him, her curiosity mingled with something gentler. "You take care of her, don't you?"

He nodded again. "She's strong. Stronger than anyone I know. But... sometimes I wish I could do more." He hesitated, then added, "If I'm not helping, I feel like I'm failing them. All of them."

"You're not failing," Ole said, the certainty in her tone surprising him. "You came out here alone with an axe for her. That's more than most."

Her words settled over him like a cloak that almost fit.

The Shadow of Secrets

They reached a thicker part of the woods, where the trees grew closer together and the light thinned. Ole slowed, her steps turning cautious.

"You asked why I'm always on the edge of the village," she said.

Ebele glanced at her. "Yeah."

"My mother says it's safer there," Ole said, her tone careful. "She says we're different."

"Different how?"

She hesitated, fingers fidgeting with the golden threads in her hair. The easy confidence she'd shown before flickered.

"It's complicated," she said at last.

"I can keep a secret," Ebele said, his voice steady despite the flutter in his chest. "I've... had to keep a lot of things."

Ole met his gaze, something unspoken passing between them. For a moment, she seemed on the verge of saying more.

Before she could answer, a soft cry echoed through the trees.

Meeting Asata

Ebele tensed, tightening his grip on the axe. Ole motioned for him to follow as she darted toward the sound.

They emerged into a small clearing where a woman knelt beside a bundle of firewood, her face pale and strained.

“Asata,” Ole called, her voice cutting through the tension.

The woman looked up, her dark eyes weary but sharp. Her hair, braided like Ole’s, gleamed in the fading light.

“Who’s this?” she asked, her gaze shifting to Ebele.

“A friend,” Ole said quickly. “This is Ebele.”

A friend.

The word landed in his chest with a quiet shock. No one his age had called him that before.

Asata studied him for a long moment before nodding. “Thank you for helping her,” she said, her voice steady despite the tightness in her posture.

Ebele shook his head. “I didn’t... I mean, she helped me.”

Asata’s lips quirked into a faint smile. “That sounds like her.”

She reached for Ebele’s hand, surprising him. “Thank you. Truly.”

Her grip was firm but warm, and Ebele felt a flicker of understanding. This woman, like his mother, carried the weight of the world on her shoulders and still found the strength to keep moving.

“Come,” Asata said, rising carefully. “The forest isn’t safe after dark.”

Ole stepped closer to Ebele as they began the walk back. “You did well,” she murmured.

“I didn’t really do anything,” he replied.

“You stayed,” she said. “Sometimes that’s harder than swinging an axe.”

As they walked back toward the village, the trees thinning around them, Ebele felt something shift. The tight coil inside his chest loosened, just a little.

For the first time in a long while, he didn't feel quite so alone.



10

CHAIN'S OF SACRIFICE

The first rays of dawn spilled over Eshavel, painting the horizon in hues of amber and crimson. Cro stood at the cliff's edge, his sinewy frame coiled with tension. The mountain stretched endlessly beneath him, its ancient rock face whispering of battles long past. Below, the village lay nestled like a fragile jewel in the wilderness. Smoke curled from its hearths—a sign of life that now seemed heart-breakingly fleeting.

Ayathra's voice broke the stillness, tight with urgency.

"They're coming."

Cro turned sharply, his instincts prickling. Ayathra stood poised, her sharp gaze sweeping the horizon. Her transformation had grounded her in humanity, yet she retained an unyielding ferocity. She no longer soared with immortal wings, but an eagle's sharpness still haunted her movements, and a warrior's resolve was etched in her features.

“How far?” Cro asked, though the growing tremor beneath his feet already warned him.

Ayathra raised her arm, pointing toward the distant line where the earth seemed to shake under an advancing weight. A mass of figures—thousands strong—emerged from the mist, their banners fluttering like carrion birds above a sea of steel. Light caught their weapons, reflecting shards of broken stars.

“Surrok,” Cro growled, his voice low and guttural. His fists clenched at his sides.

Ayathra’s hand found his arm, her grip firm despite its tremor. “They will destroy everything if we don’t act. You must go to the village—warn them.”

“And leave you here?” His voice cracked, disbelief shadowing his words. The idea of turning his back on the mountain felt like abandoning half his heart.

Her fierce gaze met his. “You must. They need you. Ole needs you.”

The mention of their daughter struck Cro like a blow. For a heartbeat he faltered, torn between the summit and the valley, the seer and the child.

He hesitated only a moment before nodding, his jaw tightening. Without another word, he turned and sprinted down the winding path, his movements fluid and panther-like.

Behind him, Eshavel hummed—a low, sorrowful note.

The Siege Begins

By the time Cro reached the village, chaos had ignited.

Flames licked at thatched roofs, devouring wood and reed. The air reeked of smoke and fear. Steel clashed, mingling with the anguished cries of the wounded and the piercing screams of children. The sanctuary he had built now burned like any other place men had abandoned to violence.

“Ole!” Cro’s voice rose above the cacophony, raw and desperate. “Ole, where are you?”

“Father!”

Her voice cut through the din like a beacon.

He turned and spotted her at the village’s edge. Relief surged through him, but it was fleeting. Beside her stood Asata and Ebele, their frightened faces stark against the surrounding fire and chaos.

“Father, they’re taking them!” Ole cried, pointing toward invaders binding villagers in chains. “They’re my friends. Please, help them!”

Cro’s sharp gaze followed her trembling hand.

Warriors in dark armor forced villagers to their knees, shackles biting into wrists and ankles. Asata was shielding Ebele with her body, struggling against a soldier’s grip. A vicious strike split the air; she crumpled, blood seeping from her temple. Ebele screamed, lunging for his mother.

The sight of chains around his people—around a boy who had only just begun to hope—stabbed into Cro like a memory from another age. Chains that had once been threat, now becoming reality.

He crouched before Ole, gripping her shoulders.

“Stay here,” he ordered, his voice fierce but steady. “Do not move.”

“But—”

“Promise me, Ole.” The steel in his tone brooked no argument.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she nodded. “I promise.”

Cro turned and plunged into the fray.

The Lion’s Trap

Cro fought with feral precision, each strike calculated and unrelenting. He moved through the chaos like a storm given flesh, his blows shattering blades and bone alike. Villagers scrambled for cover behind him, clutching children and dragging the injured away from the worst of the fighting.

He reached Asata and Ebele, his presence a sudden wall between them and their captors. A brutal strike sent one soldier sprawling; another fell with a cry as Cro's staff drove into his chest.

"Run!" Cro barked at Asata, hauling her upright. "Take your son and go!"

"Cro—"

"Go!" he roared, his voice leaving no room for protest.

Asata clutched Ebele's hand and stumbled toward the treeline. Ebele glanced back once, eyes wide, before the smoke swallowed them.

Cro turned back, chest heaving, just as Surrok stepped from the flames.

Surrok's imposing frame radiated menace, his lion-like features accentuated by the flickering firelight. His mane of golden hair glowed like molten metal, and his copper eyes burned with cruel amusement.

"Well, well," Surrok drawled, his voice a silken threat. "The mighty Cro, protector of the weak."

Cro's jaw tightened. "Leave this place, Surrok. These people have done nothing to you."

A predatory grin spread across Surrok's face. "You misunderstand, Cro. My quarrel isn't with them. It's with you."

Cro's fists curled, his muscles taut. "Then face me. Leave them out of this."

"Oh, but that wouldn't be any fun," Surrok purred.

He gestured, and soldiers dragged prisoners back into view—villagers bound in chains, faces streaked with soot and tears. Among them, Asata and Ebele reappeared, their earlier escape cut short. Ebele's eyes met Cro's, full of fear and something like betrayal: *You said run. You said we'd be safe.*

"You see," Surrok said lightly, "breaking you means breaking everything you hold dear."

Cro's breath caught. The weight of every life in the village settled on his shoulders. He had built this place with his own hands. Now, it could be unmade because of him.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice rough.

Surrok leaned in, his words dripping with malice. "Your life for theirs. A simple exchange."

A Father's Sacrifice

Cro closed his eyes.

In the darkness behind them, memories rose like ghosts: Ayathra's laughter under the banyan tree, Raine's first cry, Ole's small hand wrapped around his finger. The village growing from rough stones and timber. The promise he had made to Ayathra on Eshavel's slope—that he would protect what they had built.

When he opened his eyes again, his gaze was steady.

"Let them go," he said. "All of them. I'll do it."

Surrok's grin widened. "Wise choice."

"Swear it," Cro added, voice like stone. "By whatever honor you have left."

For a heartbeat, Surrok's eyes hardened. "Very well," he said. "By the covenant I twist and the chains I wield: your life in place of theirs."

Cro knelt.

Soldiers surged forward, binding his wrists and ankles in heavy chains. The cold bite of metal dug into his skin, but he did not flinch. This was not the first time he had felt weight like this—only now, it was chosen, not forced.

He lifted his head, searching the tree line.

There—just beyond the smoke, half-hidden by leaves—Ole watched, her small hands clamped over her mouth, tears streaming down her face. Ebele and Asata crouched beside her, Asata's arm wrapped protectively around both children.

“Be strong,” Cro called to her, his voice breaking. “Tell your mother I’ll find my way back.”

Ole shook her head, sobs choking her, but his words found a place in her anyway.

Surrok’s laugh echoed as Cro was dragged toward the waiting ships.
Foreshadowing the Ship

As the invaders herded the remaining captives toward the shore, Ole lingered at the edge of the trees, her small fists clenched so tight her nails bit into her palms. Chains clinked like a cruel song as villagers were forced up crude ramps onto the ships.

She watched as Ebele and Asata—now released and forgotten amidst the confusion of Surrok’s bargain—melted back into the forest, guided by other fleeing villagers. They were safe, for now.

But the image of her father, bound and beaten, burned in her mind.

He looked smaller beneath the weight of iron, yet somehow larger than he had ever been: a man choosing chains so others could walk free.

Ole turned and ran, her feet pounding against the earth as she raced toward Eshavel. The air tore at her lungs, but she did not slow.

Ayathra had to know. The Oracles had to know. They would find a way to bring him home.

They had to.



11

WORLD OF SHADOWS

The ship groaned like a wounded beast, its timbers straining against the relentless push of the waves. Below deck, the air was suffocating—a heavy blend of sweat, excrement, and despair. Shackled to the floor, Cro sat with his back against the cold wooden wall, his head tilted toward the faint crack of starlight filtering through the planks above.

It had been hours—or perhaps days—since he was last on solid ground. Time had become meaningless in this dark void. Around him, other prisoners lay in various states of exhaustion or despondence, their bodies curled into themselves as though trying to retreat from their own existence.

Cro's legs ached where the iron shackles bit into his flesh, raw and inflamed. He shifted, letting out a low groan as he adjusted his weight. His stomach churned violently with the motion of the ship, and the nauseating stench around him didn't help. Leaning forward, he retched, bile splattering the floor.

As he wiped his mouth, his eyes caught a faint glimmer near his feet.

A shard of light, small but luminous, danced across the wooden planks. For a moment, the sight transported him. He remembered the stars he once called home, their brilliance wrapping him in warmth and purpose. He remembered Eshavel's peak, Ayathra's laughter, Ole's small hand wrapped around his finger.

Now those memories only deepened the ache in his chest.

His name had once carried weight—Cro, the balance-keeper, the one who stood between worlds. But here, shackled and broken, he felt like a hollow shell, his identity stripped away like skin from his back.

He closed his eyes. *What good is a balance-keeper in chains?*

The Deck of Despair

A sharp yank on the chain around his ankles jolted Cro from his thoughts. The violent pull slammed his head against the bars behind him.

“On your feet, prisoner!” a guttural voice barked, followed by the butt of a rifle driving into his ribs.

Cro gritted his teeth as pain flared through his side.

Around him, prisoners groaned and shuffled, dragged to their feet by equally rough hands. The guards, brutish figures cloaked in smoke and firelight, herded them toward the stairs. Cro was forced to ascend with the others, his chains rattling with every step.

When he finally emerged onto the deck, the icy wind struck his bare skin like needles, and he shivered violently. The prisoners were corralled into a tight circle, their emaciated forms pressed together for warmth. The sea roared around them, its black depths an eternal void. Above, the sky was a blanket of stars, indifferent to the suffering below.

A sudden shriek tore through the heavy silence.

Cro turned.

A boy, no older than twelve, thrashed against the grip of a towering soldier. His wide, tear-filled eyes locked onto a woman being dragged to the center of the deck.

“Give me my mama!” the boy screamed, his small fists pounding futilely against the soldier’s chest.

The woman fought back fiercely, her cries a mix of rage and desperation. But her captor was unyielding. With a cruel laugh, he raised his spear and drove it into her left eye.

The world seemed to slow.

Blood sprayed across the deck as the woman crumpled, clutching her face in agony. The boy’s scream broke into raw, wordless sound.

Cro’s breath came in ragged gasps as he watched the brutality unfold. His hands clenched into fists, nails biting into his palms. Every part of him screamed to move, to act, but the chains turned his body into an anchor.

The Branding of Cro

“You!” one of the guards growled, his gaze locking onto Cro. “Step forward!”

Cro didn’t move.

The guard advanced, grabbing Cro by the collar and yanking him to his feet. “What’s your name, boy?”

Cro’s jaw tightened. He remained silent, his gaze defiant.

“Name!” the guard roared, slamming the butt of his rifle into Cro’s stomach.

Doubling over in pain, Cro finally rasped, “I am not deaf.”

The guard’s eyes narrowed. Insolence, even small, was a luxury few survived here.

“Commandant!” he barked. “Bring the iron!”

Moments later, a glowing brand was brought forth, its red-hot surface shimmering in the torchlight. The guard grinned maliciously as he pressed it against Cro's chest.

A scream tore from Cro's throat as the searing pain consumed him. The smell of burning flesh filled the air. The other prisoners recoiled, horror etched into their gaunt faces.

When the iron was removed, Cro collapsed to his knees, his chest heaving. The mark throbbed like a second heart, pulsing heat through his ribs.

"You have a new name now," the guard sneered. "And everyone will know it."

Cro stared at the deck, vision swimming. A part of him wanted to believe they had burned his old name away. Another, smaller part—stubborn and quiet—knew they hadn't.

Ebele and Asata

Hours later, the deck cleared, leaving only the dead and the dying.

Cro sat slumped against the railing, his body trembling with exhaustion and pain. The brand on his chest burned in time with the slow, relentless roll of the waves.

A faint whimper caught his attention.

Turning, he saw the boy from earlier crouched beside the woman's broken form. Tears streamed down his face as he gently wiped her brow with shaking hands.

"She's all I have left," the boy whispered, though no one had asked. "Don't leave, Mama... don't leave..."

Cro's heart twisted.

Summoning what little strength he had, he crawled toward them, chains scraping against the planks.

"Stay back!" the boy cried, his voice trembling with fear. "Don't touch her!"

Cro raised his hands, palms open. "I'm here to help," he said, his voice hoarse but steady.

The boy hesitated, then nodded once.

Together, they lifted the woman—awkward and painful, but careful—and carried her to a quieter corner of the deck. Cro tore strips from his tattered shirt, using them to bind her wounds as best he could, hands gentler than his size suggested.

"She's all I have left," the boy repeated, his voice breaking. "Don't let her die."

Cro met the boy's gaze, his own eyes heavy with emotion. "I'll do everything I can," he said. "What's your name?"

"Ebele," the boy replied softly. "It means 'mercy.'"

The name struck a chord deep within Cro. *Mercy. On a ship like this.*

"Your mother is strong, Ebele," he said. "She's fought to stay with you this long. She'll fight through this too."

The boy's small hands trembled as he gripped Cro's.

"You promise?" he whispered.

Cro hesitated. He had broken promises before—some by choice, some by force. But looking into the boy's eyes, he could not turn away.

"I promise," he said.

Asata's Awakening

Time blurred into a sluggish, pounding rhythm of waves and pain.

At last, the woman—Asata—stirred. Her good eye fluttered open, clouded with confusion. She flinched at the sting of the bandages and the throb behind her ruined eye.

Her gaze fell on Cro, and she instinctively shrank back. "Where is Ebele?" she rasped.

Cro placed a hand on her shoulder. “He’s safe,” he said. “He’s just there.” He nodded toward the boy, curled close by, finally asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Asata tried to rise, panic flashing across her face. Cro gently but firmly kept her from straining.

“Please,” he said, his voice steady. “You need to conserve your strength. He needs you alive.”

Her breathing slowed, and she looked up at him, her expression softening as she searched his face.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Cro,” he replied simply.

Her eye widened. “The Cro?” she whispered. “The balance-keeper?”

Cro frowned, the old title feeling out of place amid salt and blood. “How do you know that name?”

“My grandmother spoke of you,” Asata murmured. “She said you were a guardian of balance, set between worlds. She said you would return when the world needed you most.”

Cro’s gaze drifted down to the still-smoldering brand on his chest. “The world doesn’t need me,” he said quietly. “I couldn’t even protect my own village. My own child. I’ve failed more times than I can count.”

Asata reached out, her fingers brushing the edges of the mark. It had been meant as a tool of humiliation, a scar to define him by another’s will. Her touch was gentle, reverent.

“You still carry the divine within you,” she said. “That cannot be taken away—not by chains, not by fire.”

Her words stirred something in Cro—a flicker of warmth, fragile but undeniable. He had been many things: warrior, builder, husband,

father. Captive. But perhaps those things had not been erased, only buried.

A Promise in the Darkness

That night, as the ship drifted through the endless sea, Cro sat beneath the narrow strip of sky visible from the upper deck. Ebele lay curled beside Asata, their forms silhouetted against the faint starlight.

The brand on his chest throbbed in time with his heartbeat, each pulse a reminder: he was both marked and not yet finished.

Cro closed his eyes and whispered a prayer to the Creator.

“If You still hear me,” he murmured, “guide me. Help me protect them. Help me be more than what these chains say I am.”

Above, the stars seemed to pulse, their light distant but steady.

He felt the weight of his failures—Raine’s fall, Ayathra’s grief, Ole’s tears at the forest’s edge—but alongside it, something new: the small weight of a promise made to a boy named Mercy, and the fragile trust in Asata’s single, unwavering eye.

Mercy. Renewal. Balance.

The journey was far from over. But for the first time since the chains closed around his wrists, Cro dared to believe that even here, in this world of shadows, he might still carry light.



12

WHISPERS TO ESH'AVEL

The ruins of the village stretched before Ayathra, each broken hut and scorched field a painful reminder of Cro's absence. Perched on a jagged rock, her sharp gaze swept the land below. Above, her eagle, Eira, circled in silent vigilance. The world felt unbalanced—the harmony she and Cro had worked tirelessly to maintain shattered like glass.

As she descended toward the forest edge, her steps light and deliberate, her gaze fell on Ole, playing alone near the treeline.

Ayathra approached her daughter, her movements fluid and silent. Ole sat on a fallen log, tracing patterns in the dirt with a stick. Her usual spark of mischief was dulled, her shoulders hunched with the weight of unspoken grief.

"What's wrong, my love?" Ayathra asked, her voice gentle but firm.

Ole's head snapped up, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. At her mother's question, they spilled over, carving tracks down her cheeks.

“I miss him,” she said, her voice trembling. “I miss Father.”

Ayathra’s heart clenched, but she kept her tone steady. “I know.”

“It’s all my fault,” Ole choked out, her hands curling into fists. “If only I had stopped them—if only I hadn’t told Ebele to go to that place. He listened to me, and then his mother came looking for him, and now they’re both gone. And Father...”

Her words dissolved into sobs.

“Father gave himself up to save me. I’ve failed him. I’ve failed all of them.”

Ayathra knelt before her daughter and pulled her close. Ole buried her face in her mother’s shoulder, her small body shaking with the force of her guilt.

“You know,” Ayathra began, brushing her hand through Ole’s dark hair, “your sister Raine would have felt the same way.”

Ole pulled back, her eyes red and questioning. “Raine?”

“She, too, bore the weight of choices that felt unbearable,” Ayathra said softly. “But do you know what she taught me?”

Ole shook her head.

Ayathra cupped her face, her tone firm but kind. “She taught me that even when we stumble—even when our choices bring pain—we are not defined by our failures. We are defined by how we rise from them.”

Ole sniffled, her tears slowing. “But what if I can’t rise? What if I can’t make things right?”

“You have a future ahead of you, my child,” Ayathra said, her voice infused with quiet determination. “And I want to show you something that might help you understand.”

Ole tilted her head, curiosity sparking beneath her sadness. “What is it?”

Ayathra stood and extended her hand. “We’re going to Eshavel—to the realm of the Eagle Oracles.”

The Journey to Eshavel

The climb toward Eshavel was treacherous but breathtaking.

The mountain path wound through dense forest, where ancient trees stretched skyward, their branches woven like the fingers of sleeping giants. Streams trickled down the rocky terrain, their crystal waters catching the sunlight and casting rainbows onto the mossy ground.

Eira flew ahead, scouting the path and returning periodically with sharp cries that echoed through the trees. Ayathra’s movements were swift and sure, her balance unwavering as she led Ole up the winding trail.

Ole followed, her small legs struggling to keep pace, but she pressed on, drawn by her mother’s quiet resolve and the faint hum of something calling from above.

“Mother,” Ole asked as they paused near a narrow ledge, “what is Eshavel like... up there?”

Ayathra smiled faintly, gazing toward the towering peaks. “It is a place where time feels as though it stands still,” she said. “Where the air hums with the whispers of those who came before us. It is where I first learned my place in this world—and where your sister left a part of herself for us to find.”

Ole frowned. “You’ve never talked much about Raine.”

Ayathra’s expression softened, shadows crossing her face. “Her loss was a wound so deep that I feared speaking of her would make it bleed anew,” she admitted. “But now I see that keeping her memory locked away has done you a disservice. She would have wanted you to know her—to learn from her wisdom, not just from her absence.”

Ole looked down at her feet, then back up at the mountain. “I want to know her,” she said quietly. “Even if it hurts.”

Ayathra's eyes shone. "Then we will."

Arrival at Eshavel

When they finally reached the summit, Ole gasped.

The realm of Eshavel unfolded like a dream. A vast plateau spread out beneath an open sky that shimmered with hues of gold and violet, the colors shifting like tides. Towering eagles perched on stone pillars, their feathers gleaming with an ethereal light. The air was thick with the hum of ancient songs, the voices of oracles past blending in layered harmony.

Ayathra guided Ole to the central sanctuary—a massive circular stone carved with intricate symbols. At its heart stood a pedestal, and upon it rested a scroll.

"Your sister came here many years ago," Ayathra said, her voice reverent. "She spoke with the Oracles, seeking guidance about the future of our people. This is where she recorded her visions."

Ole approached the scroll, her fingers hovering above its surface. "What did she see?" she asked.

"She saw you," Ayathra said simply.

Ole's head snapped up, her eyes wide. "Me?"

Ayathra nodded. "She spoke of a time when darkness would fall upon our people, when the ties that bind us to Eshavel would be tested. She saw a girl—young, but wise beyond her years—who would rise to lead our people into the light."

Ole's breath caught. "You think that's me?"

Ayathra knelt beside her, taking her hands. "I know it is," she said. "And I believe that everything you've been through—the pain, the loss, even the mistakes—has been preparing you for this moment."

Ole swallowed. "I don't feel like someone who leads people," she admitted. "I feel like someone who breaks things."

Ayathra squeezed her hands gently. “So did Raine,” she said. “So did I, once. The ones who feel the weight of their choices are often the ones who can be trusted with others’ futures.”

Learning Raine’s Legacy

Over the following days, Ayathra and Ole remained on Eshavel, delving into the teachings of the Oracles.

Ole learned to trace the symbols carved into the sanctuary’s walls, their meanings unfolding like a forgotten language. She practiced listening—not just with her ears, but with her spirit—to the faint, layered songs that drifted through the stone.

Ayathra shared stories of Raine: her fierce courage, her stubbornness, the way she had argued with the divine voice about the fate of their people. She spoke of Raine’s compassion for the weak, and of the day she had flown too high and met Surrok’s fire.

She also spoke of Cro—of his laughter under the banyan tree, his strength in battle, his quiet tenderness when he thought no one was watching. She told Ole how he had once stood in the very center of that sanctuary, unsure of his own worth, and had still chosen to carry a burden meant for many.

As they worked and learned together, the bond between mother and daughter deepened. Ayathra saw in Ole the same fiery determination that had driven Raine—and flashes of Cro’s steady loyalty. Ole began to see her mother not as an infallible protector, but as a woman of incredible strength and vulnerability, who had lost much and kept going anyway.

Foreshadowing the Future

One morning, as the sun rose over Eshavel, Ole stood at the edge of the plateau, gazing out at the world below. The horizon was shrouded in a faint darkness, a creeping shadow that seemed to stretch endlessly—a smoke stain on the edge of the sky.

“Mother,” Ole said, her voice steady despite the fear in her eyes, “I want to help. I want to be ready for whatever comes next.”

Ayathra stepped beside her and placed a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, her gaze firm.

“You will be,” she said. “But remember, being ready doesn’t mean being perfect. It means trusting the One who called you—and trusting yourself—even when the path seems unclear.”

Ole drew a slow breath. The guilt she carried had not vanished, but it no longer felt like a chain—more like a weight she could choose to lift.

As they descended from Eshavel, both mother and daughter carried a renewed sense of purpose. Ayathra’s heart ached for Cro, but she knew her journey with Ole was only beginning—and that together, they would honor Raine’s prophecy and stand against the darkness gathering at the edges of their world.

13

SUROK'S HUNGER

The sun dipped low in the sky, its golden rays slicing through the dense canopy of the Shadowlands. Surok crouched low in the underbrush, his sinewy human frame blending seamlessly into the wilderness. His movements were smooth and deliberate, but his sharp instincts—a legacy of his primal past—remained.

His dark eyes flicked to a rat scurrying across the forest floor. The creature froze, sensing the predator's presence, but it was too late. With a sudden, fluid motion, Surok lunged. His fingers, unnervingly dexterous, snatched the rat mid-sprint.

Without hesitation, he bit into its flesh.

The metallic tang of blood filled his mouth, a visceral satisfaction spreading through him. He tore the meat apart, his jaw working as if driven by something deeper than hunger—something animalistic that clawed at the edges of his humanity.

As he finished, Surok rose to his full height, his tall figure casting an ominous shadow over the riverbank. The rushing water mirrored his face—a lean, angular visage marked by grime and hunger. His eyes, dark as a starless night, gleamed with the predatory hunger of a beast.

But he was no beast—not entirely.

Beneath his savage instincts lay a mind sharp and calculating.

Surok turned from his reflection and drew a small, translucent stone from the folds of his cloak. It glimmered faintly with stolen radiance. Holding it up to the waning light, he murmured,

“Ahavel, watch me. Watch as I remake this world into something stronger—something worthy of its true rulers.”

The stone pulsed once in his hand, as if in answer—or warning.

The Encounter

A faint rustling in the trees pulled Surok from his reverie. His body tensed, every muscle coiling like a spring. His hand darted to the hilt of a knife strapped to his belt, and he bared his teeth—a human gesture edged with feral menace.

“Show yourself,” he growled, his voice low and commanding. “Or I’ll find you myself.”

The forest answered with silence, save for the whisper of leaves shifting in the wind.

Then, in a blur of movement, something struck him, driving him to the ground.

He rolled instinctively, bringing his knife up, but his attacker was faster. A strong hand pinned his arm, and the blade clattered to the earth.

A voice hissed close to his ear, cold and unyielding. “Remember me, Surok?”

His lips twisted into a sneer as he recognized the voice. “Ayathra.”

She leaned closer, dark eyes locking onto his. Her hair spilled over her shoulders like ink, and though her form was entirely human, her movements still carried the fluidity and precision of a hunter in flight.

Surok’s instincts screamed danger—but he didn’t flinch.

“You don’t look so powerful now,” she spat, her knife pressing against his throat. “Tell me why I shouldn’t end you here.”

Surok managed a laugh despite her grip. “You could kill me, yes,” he rasped. “But you won’t. You’re here for something more. Answers, perhaps? About Cro? About the ships? Or maybe... about the shadow swallowing your lands?”

Her knife bit deeper, drawing a thin line of blood. “Speak, Surok. Or I’ll carve the truth out of what’s left of you.”

A Test of Wills

Surok’s grin widened, a flicker of madness dancing in his eyes.

“Cro?” he said. “Oh, he’s beyond your reach, Ayathra. Taken beyond the shores your people call home. Even if you had the strength to follow, you’d find only chains and despair.”

Her grip faltered—slightly—but his sharp senses caught the tremor.

“Where is he?” she demanded. “What use could he be to you?”

He chuckled darkly. “The same use as your people: labor. Subjugation. Every stone they carry, every lash they endure—it all serves to build a kingdom that will outlast even the stars.”

“Liar,” she snarled, though doubt flickered in her eyes.

Surok’s gaze turned mocking. “If you doubt me, look to the northern shores. To the rivers choked with shadows, to the ships that cut the water like teeth. There, you’ll find the proof of your failure.”

Ayathra’s jaw tightened. Her mind raced—visions of darkened coasts, of missing villagers, of Cro in chains.

“When I find him,” she said, each word a promise, “I’ll tear your empire apart.”

His voice dropped to a whisper, dripping with venom. “Then you’ll need power, Ayathra. More than the Oracles ever gave you. And we both know what that requires.”

The Bargain

She stiffened, his words cutting deeper than any blade.

Surok's smile widened. "Let me help you," he purred. "I'll give you the strength to find Cro—to survive what waits beyond the northern shore. But in return..."

He paused, savoring the tension in her shoulders.

"Pledge your daughter to my service."

Rage flared in Ayathra's eyes. Her knife pressed harder, drawing another bead of blood. "You will never touch Ole."

"Then you'll lose her," Surok said, his voice eerily calm. "The shadows will take her, just as they'll take everything else. You know what's stalking your village. You've seen what happens to those who stand alone."

For a moment, Ayathra's composure wavered.

She pictured Ole's tear-streaked face, Cro's bound hands, Raine's fall through searing light. The weight of every choice pressed against her ribs.

"I can give her a place," Surok continued smoothly. "Not as a victim, but as a weapon. Serving at my side instead of buried beneath someone else's war."

Ayathra's fingers tightened on the hilt. For one dangerous heartbeat, the temptation flickered—not for herself, but for a future where Ole survived at any cost.

Then she shoved him back, her resolve hardening like stone.

"I'll find another way," she said.

Surok laughed as she stepped away. "Time is not on your side, Ayathra. The shadows are hungry. And even Ahaven's light is fading from your world."

A Glimmer of Hope

Ayathra fled through the forest, her breath ragged and her heart heavy. Each step carried a fresh wave of doubt: *What if he's right? What if I can't reach Cro? What if I lose Ole too?*

As despair threatened to close over her, something brushed against her cheek.

She paused and lifted her hand.

A feather rested in her palm—pure white, glowing softly in the dimness. Its light pulsed gently, out of rhythm with the darkness around her.

A voice, calm and steady, echoed in her mind. “Seek Me, Ayathra. The path is narrow, but it is yours to walk.”

The Creator's presence washed over her, not as thunder or flame, but as a quiet, unyielding certainty. She closed her fingers around the feather. Warmth surged through her chest, pushing back the chill Surok had left behind.

The weight of despair lifted slightly, replaced by a spark of stubborn hope.

She turned her gaze toward the northern horizon. The journey ahead would be fraught with danger—ships, chains, shadows—but she would not walk it alone.

Ahavel's light still burned, faint but steady, guiding her steps.

And as the Shadowlands deepened, Ayathra's resolve only grew stronger. Together, she and Ole would face whatever lay ahead—and somewhere beyond the horizon, they would find Cro.



14

THE EDGE OF FREEDOM

The Forest's Edge

The forest swelled before Cro, its dense foliage teeming with shadows and the faint rustle of nocturnal creatures. Banana leaves hung heavy from the trees, their broad fronds filtering the moonlight into fractured patterns on the ground. Cro crouched low, the earthy scent of the underbrush grounding him as he scanned the terrain.

Twenty paces to his right, voices cut through the humid night air. The glow of torches flared intermittently, light casting flickering shadows across the trees. A man moved through the brush, his eyes sweeping dangerously close to where Cro lay hidden.

Asata's hand brushed his shoulder, her presence steady despite the tension. The white lines of war paint on her cheek caught the faint light, stark reminders of the battles they'd already fought.

"We need to move," she whispered, her voice trembling just enough to betray her fear.

Cro shook his head slightly, his eyes fixed on the approaching figure. “Not yet,” he murmured.

She hesitated but nodded, raising a hand to signal the others in their group—seven men and women huddled in the darkness—to stay still.

The Weight of Capture

It had been three months since their arrival on the island—three months of captivity and degradation.

Stripped of their clothing and dignity, they had been herded like cattle into filthy pens unfit even for livestock. The nights were cold, their only company the hogs that shared their quarters. The days were worse: backbreaking labor under a whip that seemed to enjoy their pain.

Early on, Cro had tried to fight back, attempting to steal a rifle while their captors slept. The punishment had been swift and brutal—a whip searing across his back, leaving scars that burned even now.

Their captors weren’t just cruel; they were deliberate. Their malice was systematic. Cro saw the mark of Surok in them—the way they sneered, the gleam in their eyes as they wielded their power. He had seen this darkness before, and it sickened him.

Eagle.

The thought came unbidden—Ayathra’s old form, Raine’s fall, Ole’s face streaked with tears. He tried to bury it, but it clung to him like a shadow. He had lost too much already. He could not lose these people as well.

Ebele’s Hunger

“Cro.”

The soft voice of Ebele pulled him from his thoughts. The boy clutched his mother's hand, his eyes wide and rimmed with exhaustion.

"I'm hungry," he whispered.

Cro forced a smile, resting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "We'll find something soon," he said. "Just stay close to your mother."

Asata bent down, brushing a hand over her son's hair. "It won't be much longer, Ebele," she murmured. Her voice was steady, though Cro could see the strain beneath it.

He admired her strength. Despite the pain and fear in her every movement, she remained a steady anchor for her son—like Ayathra had once been for Ole. The thought tightened his chest.

Not this time, he told himself. I will not watch another child lose everything.

A Desperate Escape

The group moved low through the thickets, their bodies brushing against damp foliage. The earthy scent of the forest mingled with the faint acrid tang of smoke from the captors' campfires. Ahead, the distant whinny of horses and the rhythmic pound of hooves sent a chill through Cro.

He froze, body tense, every sense sharpening. "Riders," he said under his breath.

Asata stiffened beside him, her grip tightening on the small dagger she carried. "Do you think they've found us?"

"Likely," Cro said grimly. "But we've been careful. Let's hope it's not us they're tracking."

"Hope doesn't keep us safe," Mino hissed from behind, his frustration boiling over. "We should've turned back. This is suicide."

Cro turned, his expression calm but his voice edged with steel. “You’d prefer the pens? The whip? Watching your kin suffer while you stand by, powerless?”

“At least we’d still be alive,” Mino shot back.

Cro stepped closer, his voice dropping to a deadly whisper. “If we don’t fight for our freedom, we’re already dead. And if you keep sowing doubt, you’ll doom us all.”

Mino glared at him but relented, muttering under his breath as he fell silent.

A sharp crack split the night.

Gunfire.

The forest erupted in chaos. Bullets tore through leaves and splintered tree trunks, sending shards of bark flying.

“Run!” Cro shouted, grabbing Asata’s arm and pulling her forward.

The group scattered, the shouts of their pursuers growing louder behind them. Cro’s heart pounded as branches lashed at his face, the sound of barking dogs closing in.

A scream tore through the air.

Asata fell, her body crumpling to the ground. Blood seeped from her calf, darkening the earth beneath her.

“Mother!” Ebele cried, dropping to his knees beside her.

Cro knelt, his hands slick with her blood as he tried to staunch the wound. Asata’s breath came in ragged gasps.

“Go,” she rasped. “Save Ebele.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Cro said fiercely. He turned to the boy. “Ebele, stay close to me. Do you understand?”

The boy nodded, his face pale with fear.

Strength Beyond Measure

The barking grew louder.

Cro's heart hammered as the first dog burst through the trees, its eyes glinting with malice. Cro stepped forward, planting himself between the dog and Asata. His muscles coiled like a spring, his body alive with raw adrenaline.

The dog lunged, teeth bared.

Cro moved with inhuman speed, snatching a thick branch from the ground and swinging it in a brutal arc. The wood connected with the dog's skull with a sickening crack, sending it sprawling.

Another dog charged, but Cro was ready. His instincts burned, guiding his movements as he dodged and struck with precision, each blow fueled by memories of chains and fire.

"Ebele, help your mother!" he shouted, his voice cutting through the chaos.

The boy scrambled to drag Asata behind a tree, his small frame straining with effort. Cro's arms ached, his breath ragged, but he didn't falter. Each swing of the branch, each calculated movement, was a testament to his determination—to the promise he had made on that ship.

I will protect them.

At last, the surviving dogs retreated, whimpering back into the darkness.

A Moment of Safety

Cro dropped the branch and rushed back to Asata and Ebele.

Asata's face was pale, her breath shallow. Cro knelt beside her, his hands steady despite the tremor in his chest.

"You'll be alright," he said firmly. "We're not far now."

Ebele clutched his mother's hand, his young face etched with worry. "What do we do?" he asked.

Cro's jaw tightened. He looked at the others, huddled and shaken. "We keep moving," he said. "Together."

Asata's eyes fluttered open, her voice barely more than a whisper. "I can't... I'll only slow you down."

Cro shook his head. "I won't leave you," he said. "I've left too many behind. We'll make it. Trust me."

The words were as much for himself as for her.

The Call of Anshara

Hours later, as the group rested in the safety of a hidden clearing, Cro gazed toward the horizon. The night had deepened, but in his heart he felt the pull of a place he had never seen and yet somehow knew.

"Asata," he said softly.

She stirred, wincing as she shifted her injured leg. "Yes?"

"There's a city across the sea," Cro said. "A city where our people are in chains."

Her eyes met his, fear tempered by a flicker of resolve. "Anshara," she whispered.

"Yes," Cro said. The name felt heavy and right on his tongue. "We have to go there. We have to free them. What we escaped from here is only a fragment of what they face."

Ebele looked up at Cro, his young face lit by the faint glow of their small fire, determination burning in his eyes. "We'll go too," he said. "Won't we, Mother?"

Asata's lips curved into a faint, weary smile. "Yes," she said. "We'll go."

Cro nodded, his own resolve hardening. This escape was not the end; it was the edge of something larger.

The city of Anshara awaited—and with it, the chance not only to reclaim their freedom, but to strike at the heart of the world Surok was trying to build.



15

THE STORM BREAKS

The forest seemed to hold its breath as Cro crouched in the shadows of the palisade. The air hung thick with tension, mingled with the scent of damp earth and the acrid bite of smoke wafting from the distant fires of the compound. The setting sun cast long shadows, its fiery glow reflecting off the iron bars of the gate ahead. Every sound, every shift in the foliage, felt amplified in the eerie stillness.

Beyond the gate, the enemy moved in disciplined formation. Warriors in black robes and tiered hats patrolled the grounds, their movements precise, their voices sharp and commanding. The plantation house beyond loomed as a stark reminder of the cruelty entrenched in this place—a monument to its master's dominion. Its dark windows, shrouded in layers of soot and grime, seemed to watch every movement below, unblinking and ominous.

Cro pressed his back against the rough bark of a tree, his breathing steady, his thoughts sharp. His leopard-like reflexes and instincts,

honed through years of battle, had kept him alive where others had fallen. Tonight, they would guide him once more.

Beside him, Ayathra stood tall and vigilant, her keen eyes scanning the compound with an eagle's precision. The light breeze tugged at her dark hair, streaked with white like feathers—a mark of all she had seen and carried. She seemed carved from the very essence of the wild, her presence exuding both strength and freedom.

"We're outnumbered," she whispered, her voice sharp yet calm, each syllable a testament to her strategic foresight. Her gaze remained fixed on the enemy below, cataloging every detail, every weakness in their formation.

Cro's jaw tightened. "They think numbers will save them," he murmured. "What they don't realize is that fear holds them together—and fear crumbles under courage."

Behind them, Ole and Ebele waited, their youthful faces shadowed by the enormity of what lay ahead. Ebele clutched his dagger tightly, the leather-wrapped hilt slick with sweat, while Ole's expression was a storm of fear and resolve. They were young—too young, Cro thought with a pang of guilt—yet their resolve burned as fiercely as any seasoned warrior's.

"Father," Ole said softly, her voice quavering but steady. "What if we fail?"

Cro turned to her, his piercing eyes meeting hers with steady warmth. "Failure is giving up before the fight begins," he said. "You are stronger than you know, Ole. Both of you are."

Ebele straightened his shoulders, jaw set with determination. "We won't fail," he said.

Cro placed a hand on each of their shoulders, his grip firm but reassuring. "Then stay close, and trust in yourselves. This battle isn't just for today—it's for all the tomorrows that will follow."

The shadows deepened as the sun slipped below the horizon, casting the forest in twilight hues. A nightbird's cry pierced the air—a signal from the others hidden in the woods.

The time had come.

Cro nodded to Ayathra, and together they moved forward, silent as the creatures of the wild. Each step brought them closer to the compound's heart, where the faint clang of iron and the murmur of voices hinted at the life within. Behind them, Ole and Ebele mirrored their movements, the soft crunch of their boots muffled by the forest's damp undergrowth.

The plan was simple, yet fraught with peril. Ayathra's sharp eyes had noted a gap in the patrol—a momentary weakness in their otherwise disciplined movements. It would be their way in.

They reached the edge of the treeline, where the palisade cast long, jagged shadows across the ground. The acrid smell of the compound's fires grew stronger here, mingling with the stench of fear and oppression that clung to the air.

Cro raised a hand, signaling the others to halt.

Ayathra slipped ahead, her movements fluid and precise, her form melding with the shadows. She reached the gate's edge, pressing her back against the cold iron bars, and gestured for the rest to follow.

They moved swiftly but cautiously, breaths held, hearts pounding like war drums.

Inside the compound, the warriors moved with practiced efficiency, their voices carrying an undercurrent of tension. Cro's sharp eyes caught sight of their leader—a towering figure draped in crimson robes, his face obscured by a dark veil. His presence exuded authority, and the warriors deferred to him with unquestioning loyalty.

Cro's jaw tightened. This man was the linchpin of the enemy's strength—the embodiment of the fear that kept their people bound.

Ayathra returned to Cro's side, her expression grim but resolute. "The gap is there," she said, "but it's tighter than I thought. We'll need to be faster than the wind."

Cro nodded, his gaze locking with hers. "Then we'll be the storm."

With a silent signal, the four moved as one.

They slipped through the gap—shadows within shadows—their breaths barely audible over the faint crackle of the compound's fires. The warriors patrolling the grounds were oblivious, their gazes trained on the perimeter, blind to the threat that had already breached their defenses.

The group reached their first cover inside the compound: a stack of barrels and crates, reeking of oil and grain. Cro's senses picked up the faintest shift in the air, the distant sound of a footstep too close for comfort.

He motioned for the others to stay hidden as he drew his blade, its edge gleaming faintly in the dim light.

A guard approached, his footsteps steady, his spear held loosely at his side. Cro tensed, muscles coiled like a predator ready to strike. The guard passed within a hair's breadth of their hiding spot, his eyes scanning the darkness without seeing them.

Cro waited until the man's back was turned before signaling them to move again.

As they edged closer to the plantation house, the enormity of their task loomed over them. This wasn't just a battle for freedom—it was a battle for their very souls, for the promise of a world unshackled by tyranny.

In that moment, as they prepared to strike, Cro felt the weight of history press against him. This was a fight that would echo through the ages, a defiance that would light the path for those who would follow.

And so, with the forest's breath held once more, they moved forward into the heart of darkness, ready to carve their mark into the fabric of destiny.



16

THE RECKONING OF SHADOW'S GATE

The crescent moon hung low, casting a silver glow over the compound. A faint hum of tension permeated the air as the guards began their nightly shift change. Cro crouched in the shadows, his form blending seamlessly with the dim light. His muscles coiled like a predator's, every motion deliberate. The scars that crisscrossed his dark skin gleamed faintly in the moonlight—reminders of battles fought and lost.

He listened to the steady rhythm of the sentinels' boots crunching on gravel, their movements mechanical. Cro inhaled deeply, steadying his resolve.

Tonight was not just a raid.

Tonight was vengeance, freedom, and the reclamation of his people's dignity.

He stepped forward, the shadows reluctant to release him. His leopard-like grace gave him an almost otherworldly presence as he

strode toward the iron gate. The flickering torches above cast dancing shadows across his face, illuminating his piercing gaze.

“Stop!” barked a sentinel, raising his rifle.

The man’s armor was patched together, a motley assortment of salvaged metals and leather, but his weapon gleamed—a symbol of the oppressors’ dominance.

“Who do you think you are?” the man demanded.

Cro halted, standing tall. His voice was calm, a low rumble that carried the weight of his conviction. “I am the reckoning you’ve prayed to avoid.”

The guard sneered, his grip tightening on the rifle. “Big words for a dead man walking.”

Cro’s lips curled into a faint smirk. “I’ve heard enough talk. Let’s see if you can back it up.”

The guard’s finger twitched toward the trigger, but Cro was faster. He moved in a blur, striking the rifle aside as he drove his fist into the man’s jaw. The guard collapsed like a broken marionette, his weapon clattering uselessly to the ground.

From the shadows, Cro’s voice rang out like a battle cry. “Now!”

The Assault

The hidden survivors burst forth, their desperation turned to fury. Each of them bore the marks of a life under tyranny—faces gaunt from hunger, eyes hardened by loss.

Ayathra led the charge, her tall frame silhouetted against the torches. Her curved blade, etched with ancient runes, gleamed as it caught the firelight. She moved with the precision of a hawk diving for its prey, each strike finding its mark.

Ole and Ebele moved in tandem, their youthful energy an asset amid the chaos. Ole, her braided hair streaked with ash, darted between enemies, using her agility to turn their size against them. She

spotted a stack of barrels and kicked them into the path of an advancing guard, buying precious seconds for Ebele, who defended her flank with his twin daggers.

“Stay close!” Ole shouted, her voice sharp but steady.

“I’m with you!” Ebele replied, his movements unpolished but determined. A lifetime of labor had given him strength, and he wielded it now with unyielding resolve.

The clash of steel and the screams of the dying filled the air, mingling with the acrid stench of blood and burning oil. Cro moved through the fray like a tempest, his primal instincts honed by years of survival. A single sweep of his blade disarmed one foe, while a brutal kick sent another sprawling.

“Hold the line!” Cro roared, his voice cutting through the cacophony. “Push them back!”

Step by step, they drove the enemy toward the plantation house.

The Duel

As they pressed forward, the heavy double doors of the house creaked open, revealing Surok.

His black robes flowed around him like liquid shadow, and his golden mane shimmered in the torchlight. The blade in his hand was no ordinary weapon—it seemed to absorb the light, its edges rippling like dark water.

“Cro,” Surok called, his voice a chilling calm amid the chaos. “You’ve brought your rabble to die at my gates. A bold choice.”

Cro stepped forward, his grip tightening on his blade. “Your reign of terror ends tonight, Surok.”

Surok smirked, his fanged teeth glinting. “You think you can defeat me? I am the Shadow Sovereign. My name will be etched into eternity.”

“Your name will be forgotten,” Cro growled. “Your legacy ends in ash.”

Surok lunged, his movements unnaturally fast. The black blade arced toward Cro, but he met it with his own, the clash sending sparks into the air. The two combatants circled each other, their strikes a deadly dance of power and precision.

The earth beneath them seemed to pulse, an echo of the curse that bound the Shadow Lands. Cro felt its oppressive weight clawing at his resolve, whispering of failure, loss, and chains.

He pushed it aside, focusing on the man before him.

“Do you feel it, Cro?” Surok hissed, his strikes growing more ferocious. “The darkness that clings to this land? It is a part of me, a part of you. You cannot escape it.”

Cro countered with a powerful strike that sent Surok staggering. “The darkness belongs to you, Surok,” he said through gritted teeth. “It dies with you.”

Their blades locked, and for a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath. Cro’s muscles strained as he pushed against Surok’s unholy strength. Blood dripped from his arms, but his determination remained unshaken. Behind him, he could hear Ole’s shout, Ebele’s grunt, Ayathra’s blade finding its mark—reminders of everything he fought for.

For them. For Raine. For every name they tried to erase.

With a sudden twist, Cro disarmed Surok, sending the dark blade skittering across the ground. He drove Surok to his knees, his own blade poised at his enemy’s throat.

“For my people,” Cro said, his voice a low growl.

Surok sneered, even as blood trickled from his lips. “You cannot kill a shadow.”

Cro’s blade plunged into Surok’s chest.

The Shadow Sovereign let out a guttural scream, the sound echoing across the battlefield. The ground trembled, and the air seemed to ripple as Surok's body disintegrated into ash. A gust of wind swept the remnants into the night, leaving only silence.

Aftermath

The survivors stood frozen, weapons limp in their hands, as though afraid that any movement might wake the nightmare again.

Cro turned to them, his chest heaving. "It's over," he said.

His voice carried no triumph—only the weight of what had been lost and what still lay ahead.

Ayathra stepped forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. Her touch was gentle, grounding. "The curse is broken," she said softly, her voice a balm against the night.

Cro nodded, his gaze lifting to the horizon where the first hint of dawn brushed the sky. "Then we rebuild."

Around them, the compound that had once been a symbol of domination now lay cracked and smoldering. Chains lay broken in the dirt. The cries of the wounded mingled with the first tentative sobs of those realizing they were free.

The battle was won, but their fight for a future had only just begun.

17

THE FAREWELL

Cro had no time to luxuriate in victory; the battle was not yet truly over.

The cries of the wounded mingled with the heavy silence of the dead, and the weight of his people's survival pressed against his chest. Strength and instinct carried him forward as he turned, ramming his blade through the last attacker's chest with a feral growl.

When the final body fell, the battlefield stank of sweat, blood, and burning wood. Bodies lay sprawled across the sand, motionless save for the injured, whose groans rose faintly against the restless tide. Cro's people had survived, but most of their warriors were gone. Those still standing bore deep wounds, their eyes glazed with exhaustion.

From the corner of his vision, Ayathra descended.

Her sharp gaze swept the field, as piercing as an eagle surveying the hunt. She approached Cro, her movements swift and decisive. Without a word, she slipped his arm over her shoulder and bore his battered weight away from the wreckage.

Her human form carried the grace and strength of her namesake, every muscle taut with purpose. She climbed to the top of an ancient

tree overlooking the carnage below. There, she laid him down among the branches, her hands trembling only slightly as they touched his bruised and bloodied skin.

For hours, Ayathra tended to him. She brought water, cleansing blood and dirt from his wounds. Her touch was gentle but firm, her focus unshakable.

When he finally stirred, his head throbbed as if the weight of the world pressed against his temples.

“What happened?” Cro’s voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

Ayathra’s golden eyes met his. “You killed Surok,” she said, her tone heavy with unspoken meaning.

“Did I?”

She nodded. “And in doing so, you freed these people. Look.”

She gestured to the ground below.

Cro raised his head, vision swimming, and took in the sight. His people were rebuilding: some gathered wood, others tended to the wounded or soothed frightened children. The spark of life was returning—faint, but real.

“We won,” he murmured, a weak smile tugging at his lips.

Ayathra shook her head. “This is only the beginning,” she said, her voice steady but laced with sorrow.

Cro frowned. “Why do you say that?”

Her gaze turned distant, fixed on the horizon. “What Surok started will not end with him. Hatred lingers in the hearts of men and women, festering like an open wound. Across the world, our people remain in bondage. This victory is only a spark in the darkness.”

Cro’s hand found hers, his touch grounding her. “Then I will light the fire,” he said softly. “I am not afraid of the future.”

Her lips curved into a small, sad smile. “Your courage will carry you far,” she said. “But it will not be without cost.”

She reached into her hair and drew out a single feather. Its edges shimmered faintly, as though holding a light only she could see. Placing it in his hands, she whispered, "Inside this feather lies every secret I could not speak. It is a guide, a legacy meant for our child. But since she has gone to Ash'avael, it belongs to you now."

Cro's throat tightened. "Ayathra... I cannot accept this. Not if it means losing you."

"You must," she insisted, her voice firm though it trembled at the edges. "This is your path, Cro. You will carry our story to the ends of the earth. When the time comes, you will pass this feather to the next generation. Only the truth within it can break the chains of captivity."

"Come with me," he pleaded, his voice breaking. "We can do this together."

Tears glistened in her eyes as she cupped his face. "I wish I could," she said. "But I have seen the threads of fate, and our paths must part—for now. You will not be alone. Asata will walk with you. She will be a good companion."

"I will never love her as I love you," he said, raw with emotion.

Ayathra's hand brushed his cheek. "You do not need to," she replied. "Your love for me is eternal. It will carry you through the darkest nights."

Asata stepped forward, her tiger-like gaze steady though tears rimmed her eyes. Ayathra turned to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Protect him as I would," she said. "He will be good to you, even in the hardest times."

Asata nodded, her jaw set with determination. "I will."

Ayathra leaned forward, pressing a final kiss to Cro's lips. "I will always be watching over you," she whispered. "Look to the skies, my love."

Cro's hand tightened around the feather, its faint glow warming his palm. "I will find you again," he vowed. "Before my last breath, I will find you."

She smiled, sorrow and hope mingled. "And I will be waiting."

As Ayathra stepped back, her form began to shimmer, the golden light of Ash'avael enveloping her. Cro reached for her, but she was already fading, her figure dissolving into the wind.

Her voice, soft and distant, echoed in his ears. "Go north, Cro. There, your journey begins."

The Journey Begins (revised)

When Cro and his companions arrived in the new world, the air was heavy with an unfamiliar energy. Trees stretched impossibly high, their branches intertwining like ancient sentinels guarding secrets. The ground beneath their feet hummed faintly, alive with power.

Cro turned to Asata, who stood close beside him, her instincts on high alert. Behind them, Ole and Ebele clung to one another, their eyes wide with wonder and fear.

"Where are we?" Asata whispered.

Cro glanced at the feather in his hand, its glow pulsing softly. "Ash'avael," he said. "We're exactly where we're meant to be."

As the four of them began their trek northward, the wind rose, carrying with it the faint sound of drums. Cro tightened his grip on the feather, feeling its warmth seep into his skin. The road ahead was shrouded in mist, but he marched forward, his steps sure and steady.

Behind him, the others followed, their fates intertwined by the legacy Ayathra had entrusted to them. The future stretched out endlessly before them—an uncharted horizon filled with both peril and promise.

And as Cro led his people into the unknown, he felt her presence in every breath of wind, every rustle of leaves. Ayathra was with him—her

spirit in the feather, in the sky, in the story that was only beginning to unfold.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



M.C. Rose is a writer from Montreal Quebec. Her first poetry collection was published in 2015 with prolific press. A recipient of the Canada Arts Counsel Grant, M. C. Rose spent much of her experiences as a spoken word artist in the community. Her passion is helping others find their voice and giving them a safe space to share their stories