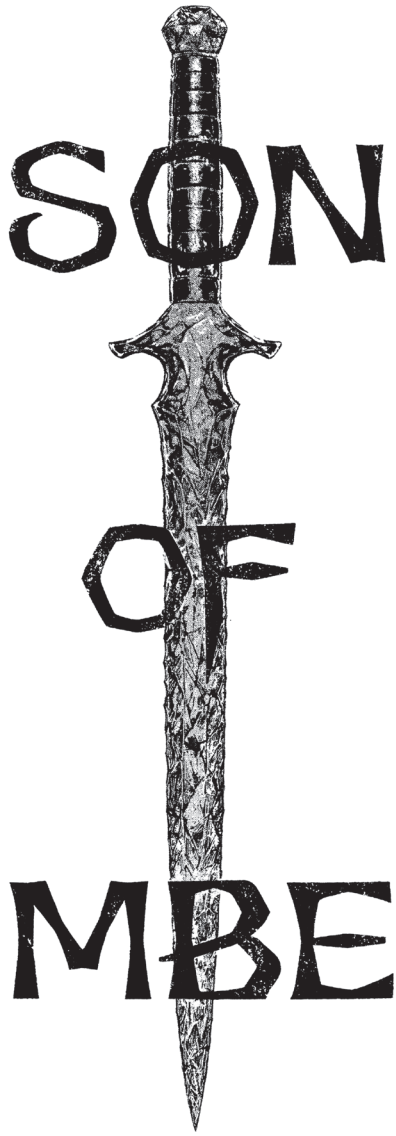


LUKE BATEMAN

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PART I

1

I venture into the Darkwood forest, my dreams calling out to me, invisible hands pulling me forward.

A branch crunches beneath my foot as I tread along the worn path. The sound snaps through the morning quiet, and something stirs in the underbrush nearby. I freeze, listening. A timber dragon—the size of a large hound—had been sighted near town last span, forcing me to be extra cautious whenever entering the Darkwood.

Despite being the smallest variety of dragon—or so I am told, having never seen any other kind—timber dragons are vicious creatures. They resemble great lizards, except for having six legs, all ending in sharp claws, and jaws filled with teeth that can shred a man to pieces. What truly sets them apart, though, are their scales. Their hide resembles the rough bark of an oak, allowing them to blend into the forest with ease. I've heard a few stories of people confusing a timber dragon for forest debris, practically standing upon one before realising their mistake. Fortunately, timber dragons usually flee whenever a human comes near, but Ma had still warned me to be careful; even a full span of seven days isn't long enough to be certain one has moved on.

The dragon had been spotted Third-day before last, and it is Fifth-day today. Nine days since one of the townsmen had reported it. I'm near certain it won't still be here, but one can never be too careful in the Darkwood. I hold my breath, continuing to listen—but the forest

remains silent. I finally exhale, confident no dragon is hunting me, and continue on my journey.

Despite winter loosening its grip and spring coming hard on its heels, the air in the forest is still sharp and crisp. It nips at my exposed skin and burns my lungs. Winters aren't overly cruel this far south—snow doesn't fall here like it does in the north—but no one ever mourns its passing. Spring always seems to bring life back to the people of Edge.

It also brings my fourteenth naming season. I don't feel fourteen. I'm still all angles, more bone than muscle—manhood keeps its door closed to me. I'm not short, but the boys I've grown up with have all begun to grow taller, their shoulders broadening, voices deepening. They're changing, moving forward, while I feel as though I've been left behind—like growing up is another game they won't let me join in on.

The path narrows as I go deeper into the forest, and I slow as the trees close around me. Sunlight carves through the canopy in spears of gold, slicing the forest into sections. As I cross between them, it feels like stepping out of the world I know into something half dreamt. The Darkwood is more than just trees and leaves to me; it is where my fantasies come to life, sprouting like saplings from the forest floor, soaring through the canopy on wings like an owl.

In the real world, I am just Aeyun Dawns: unremarkable, not worth a second glance. But here in the Darkwood, I am more. Here, I can be whoever I want to be. Here, I can be magnificent. And most importantly, here I am safe from bullies.

The sound of axes biting into wood reaches me—a sharp, rhythmic *thunk* echoing through the trees. I know it well. I follow the sound and find them in a clearing of their own making: the Fellers.

Tall, broad-shouldered men, arms like the oaks they bring down. Swinging steel with the strength of bulls; landing it with the precision of a healer. Their coats hang from nearby branches, their labour creating enough warmth to ward off the morning chill.

Fellers are the most respected men in Edge, and many boys my age are hoping to enter their ranks in the coming turn. When a boy reaches his fourteenth naming season, he's permitted to apprentice to a guild—if the guild will have him, that is. It's the first real step toward manhood, the moment when a future is chosen. Most boys in Edge aspire to the axe. They want callouses on their hands and respect from their peers; to leave the title of boy behind and embrace the rank of man.

I already know how that story ends for me. I'm not built for their work. Not broad enough, or heavy enough. The Fellers don't say it outright, but they don't need to. I already know I'll be offered an apprentice with the baker, or perhaps the cobbler—something that keeps me occupied and out of the way.

Some boys leave when that truth settles in, making for Myrwood—the capital city of Mileth—to chase opportunities Edge can't offer. But most stay, following their da's footsteps into the same guilds, the same lives. The issue is: I don't have a da's footsteps to follow.

I watch the Fellers work, their morning chatter carrying easily through the clearing.

"Aeyun, lad," a voice bellows. "Good to see you!"

I turn and spot Broph grinning at me from across the stumps—master of the Fellers' guild. He stands beside a freshly-felled oak, arms folded over his barrel chest.

"Morning, Master Broph," I reply, snaking through the maze of stumps toward him.

"None of that 'Master' nonsense, boy," he retorts, dropping his axe with a thud. "I've told you, it's just Broph. Unless you've come to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage?" He winks.

I laugh and give him an exaggerated bow. "No, Mas—Broph. Rylan would kick my arse if he thought I was kissing his sister."

"Ha! And I'd do worse, lad," he says, clapping a hand the size of a kitchen pan onto my shoulder. I think I see a hint of sorrow come into his eyes as he adds, "It's almost your fourteenth naming season, Aeyun.

Have you any thought as to what you're going to do? I'm sure your ma will have spoken with you about it."

I shift my weight beneath Broph's gaze. "Ma says there's no need to rush. That growing up isn't something I need to force."

"Aye," he says, smiling knowingly. "That does sound like something Illaine would say."

I give a small nod, staring at the ground. Ma has always been very protective of me, knowing I'm a little different to the other boys; softer, gentler, quieter. She says I was born with my head half in the clouds, but that dreaming isn't a flaw, only a different kind of strength. She never laughs when I tell her about the characters I invent, or the places I go when the world is too much. She simply listens. She listens like it's the only thing that matters.

"She said my purpose will find me," I add, slowly lifting my eyes. "That I was born for great things."

Broph studies me for a long moment. "Aye," he says at last, unconvincingly. "Have you thought about looking further abroad, lad? Myrwood has plenty of opportunities for someone like—"

He pauses. I know what he was going to say. For someone like me—someone unsuited to the hard life of Edge.

"Someone as smart as you," he says instead.

"Ma wants me close," I reply evenly, putting aside my hurt. "Says I'm not ready for the world yet." I don't add that without siblings or a da, I'd be leaving her on her own, and I don't want to do that.

"Nothing wrong with that, lad," he says. "A good parent holds on as long as they can." He claps my shoulder again, lighter this time. "Just don't forget—you've got to choose something sooner or later."

I nod and smile, though my chest feels tight.

Broph gives my shoulder one last squeeze, then steps back. "Best I get back to it. Oaks don't fall on their own, and the lads'll hang me if they think I'm leaving all the hard work to them." A few of the Fellers nearby chuckle. Broph looks back at me once more. "Say hello to your ma for me?"

I smile. "I will, Broph."

He gives a curt nod, satisfied, then hefts his axe and returns to his work. I linger for a heartbeat longer, watching the Fellers, then turn away to continue my adventure.

I raise a hand in farewell as I slip out of sight, making my way into the southern forest. My stomach fills with butterflies the moment the thud of their axes no longer reaches my ears. This is where I can be anyone I want to be. I bubble with excitement—who shall I be today?

I enter my armoury of thought—the name I have for the place in my mind where I construct my characters—and rifle through them like I'm picking an outfit. Laylan Westerman, I decide. A favourite of mine, a character I've played many times. Laylan is a wandering huntsman from a far-off land, a slayer of great beasts. Laylan is brave. Laylan is fearless. People listen when Laylan speaks. Laylan is . . . everything I'm not.

I slip out of Aeyun Dawns, and into the skin of Laylan Westerman, wrapping him around me. My shoulders straighten, my eyes narrow, my strength triples. Laylan's boldness fills my chest. I walk, my hand resting on an imaginary sword at my hip, eyes scanning the trees. Laylan always scans the trees. Laylan doesn't make careless mistakes.

The forest fades around me.

Now I stand on a ridge, surrounded by a horde of demons, their eyes glowing red with fire. I am one man alone against a tide of darkness. I draw my sword as the demons surge toward me, snarling and clawing. My blade rises to meet them, singing as it cuts them down, slicing through them like a scythe through wheat.

I move through the demon horde as though I am the wind itself—flowing, untouchable—leaving hundreds of slaughtered corpses in my wake. They continue to advance, relentless in their assault, but Laylan does not tire. Laylan only grows faster, stronger, deadlier. He was born for this; some say he came into the world with a sword already in his hand.

I stand amid the ruin of demon bodies I've created—their blood flowing in rivers at my feet—and look out over what remains of the evil horde. "Is that all you've got?" I shout. "Is there no challenger worthy of my blade?"

A screeching laugh ripples from the demons, like steel against stone, and the horde begins to part in the middle, creating a path through their ranks. From somewhere beyond my vision, giant footfalls begin to sound, shaking the ground with every step.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

My blood pulses with excitement. In the distance, a monstrous demon lord emerges, its entire body sheathed in black scales. It opens its maw and roars, revealing row upon row of teeth the size of axe heads.

I grin. Finally, a worthy opponent for the legendary Laylan Westerman. The demon lord lowers its head and charges, its footfalls shaking the ground as it closes the distance. I tighten my grip on my sword, centring myself to strike. I revel in knowing the lesson I'm about to teach it—that of the two of us, *I* am the one to be feared.

"Well, well, well," a voice calls, shattering the scene in my mind.

The demon horde vanishes, and I'm once again standing in the Darkwood, heart racing, a stick clenched in my hand. I don't remember picking it up. Slowly, I turn.

Two boys stand a few paces behind me. Lomm and Brost. I know them well. Boys from town. Boys who've tormented me my whole life.

Brost's mouth curls in a mocking smile. "Talking to yourself again, Aeyun?"

Lomm lets out a short laugh, looking at Brost. "Did you hear him? He wants a worthy challenger."

Heat rushes to my face. I know how childish I must look, alone in the woods, holding a stick like a sword. My fingers loosen and the branch slides from my hand, landing uselessly at my feet.

"Still at it," Lomm says, stepping closer. "Playing hero."

Brost follows him, slow and easy. "Thought you'd have grown out of that by now."

The space between us shrinks. The forest—so vast moments ago—constricts around me. What are they doing here? They must have spotted me talking to the Fellers and trailed me. I'm suddenly very

aware of my breathing, which comes short and sharp. I open my mouth, but no words come. They never do.

"Careful," Brost mocks. "He might cut us down with his sword."

"Go aw—" I start as Lomm laughs, but don't get to finish.

Brost punches me in the chest. Hard. I stagger backward—arms windmilling—and crash to the ground. The fall knocks the breath from me in a sharp, weak gasp.

Fear and confusion tangle inside me. Usually their attacks are only verbal, but out here—where no one can hear or see—they're undaunted.

"Get up, hero." A boot slams into my ribs.

Pain bursts through my side. I curl forward instinctively, dragging air back into my lungs, but another kick lands on my shoulder, sending a jolt of pain down my arm.

"Fight us with your sword, hero!"

I try to scramble away as they laugh, but hands grab me, hauling me up just long enough for a fist to crash into my stomach. It knocks the air from me and I hit the ground again, curling in on myself, arms over my head, knees drawn tight. Heavy kicks smash into my ribs, my stomach, my legs; more vicious than anything I've experienced from them before.

"Please, stop," I plead.

"Think you're special?" one of them growls. "Think that you're better than us?"

I curl in tighter. There is no demon lord. No blade in my hand. Only pain.

And . . . something else.

A pressure builds in my chest, a heat—like a tiny ember has been placed there. The heat starts spreading slowly, then rapidly gains pace, rushing outward into my limbs, like liquid fire racing through my veins.

Heat continues to build, flooding me until I feel like a waterskin that's going to rupture. My vision blurs—then goes black. I hear nothing, not even my own screams.

I feel as though my body's unravelling, disintegrating into nothingness. Then something snaps—and the pressure within me detonates;

a bone-shaking pulse bursting outward with a *WHUMPH*. The world comes rushing back all at once, my lost senses slamming into place, and I hear my assailants scream.

Then there is silence.

I stay still for a few breaths, before lifting my head. Leaves and dust float in the air, drifting slowly back to the ground. I spot my attackers several paces away, both on their backs, scrambling to regain their feet.

My skin tingles. My chest feels hollowed out. My heart pounds rapidly. The two boys find their feet, turning to look at me, colour draining from their faces. Their eyes are wide, mouths open. They stare at me as though I'm a timber dragon.

"What . . . what happened?" I ask, my voice shaking.

Neither of them answers. They just turn and run.

I listen to their footfalls fade, then try to stand, but the world spins violently and my knees buckle. I drop to my hands and vomit, stomach heaving until there's nothing left. I collapse to the ground, unmoving, eyes squeezed shut.

I lie there and count my breaths, getting to a hundred before my body stops shaking, another hundred before I feel strong enough to test my legs. My stomach lurches as I push myself upright, but I breathe through it and stumble toward a nearby oak, leaning against it until my strength returns. When I'm ready, I slowly push away from the tree and take a few steps, testing my balance. Once I'm certain I won't fall, I run. I run until the trees thin. I run until I reach the edge of the forest. I run and I don't stop running until I see home.

"Ma!" I shout, bursting through the door.

She's there instantly. Arms closing around me. Solid and safe.

"Yunny," she gasps. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

I don't tell her. I don't tell her about the boys, or the pain, or the explosion. I don't tell her there's something wrong with me. I just breathe.

Later that evening—after spending the afternoon collecting apples—Ma and I sit before the hearth, warming ourselves in the heat of the fire, cosied up next to each other on a settle. The glow of the hearth illuminates Ma's beautiful face, casting warm light over her soft features.

"Do you have any new adventure stories for me?" Ma enquires.

The scene from earlier today flashes in my mind and I recall the sensation of my body unravelling. "None," I say quickly. "Do you have a story you can tell me instead?"

She hums. "How about the two moons?"

I groan. "I've already heard that one. I want something new."

"Something new?" she repeats, the corner of her mouth lifting. "Hmm. Well, there is one story that I've been saving all these turns. I suppose now that you're almost of an age . . ." her voice trails away. "I suppose you're old enough to hear it."

My cheeks lift, and I settle in.

"Long ago," she starts, her tone low and heavy with the weight of imagined centuries, "before anything existed, there was only Her—a being so mighty we cannot even begin to imagine the vastness of her power."

I sit in silence, the story wrapping itself around me. These are my favourite moments, where Ma weaves her stories like magic and the world falls away.

"She used Her own essence to shape all things," Ma continues. "Pushing back the void, threading Herself through the dark expanse; from Her came the stars, the earth, the oceans, and every living creature. This is why we call Her Creation, mother of all."

"I know this already," I say impatiently. "The Father in Edge will tell anyone that'll listen."

"Well," Ma replies in mock affront. "Did he also tell you that Her essence—Aether—courses through everything? Through the fire in the hearth. Through the earth this cottage is built upon." Her eyes turn to meet mine. "Even through you and I."

My brows lift. "No, he didn't."

"Hm," Ma intones. "Well it does, but Creation knew that what She created needed governance, that Aether could not be left unattended—not without a guiding hand."

I feel the story heightening and shuffle a little closer.

"So," Ma continues, "She fashioned five stewards, each formed from a different piece of Herself, siblings to one another. She gave a piece of Her soul to govern time; She named him Philroe."

"Philroe," I echo, the name crisp on my tongue.

"She gave a piece of Her heart to govern love; She named her Azarene."

This name sends a comforting warmth through me.

"She gave a piece of Her body," Ma goes on, "to govern earth; She named him Brune. She gave a piece of Her mind to govern knowledge; She named her Varmyra. And finally . . ." She breathes. "She gave a piece of Her shadow to govern chance; She named her Nylsa."

A log crackles in the hearth, flames dancing to the rhythm of the story.

"Humans called these five beings gods," Ma informs me. "Because they were born of Creation, they possessed the knowledge of how to command Aether, but they were forbidden from wielding it themselves—Creation ensuring that none of her children would ever seize the power to usurp her. Their role was to maintain balance. And they did . . . for a time."

"What happened?" I breathe the words, knowing the good part of the story is coming.

Ma smiles at me. "At first they watched from afar, for they could not enter the mortal realm. But after some time, they chose one human each; one soul to carry the will of a god. These chosen were called Pillars, and they were taught how to control Aether."

Her eyes are oddly distant as she stares into the hearth, voice becoming dreamy. "They were the hand by which a god could touch the world. Through their Pillars, the gods guided humanity to peace and

prosperity. Pillars taught the art of shaping Aether to other mortals, and those capable of performing the craft—for not all could—became known as Weavers."

"Weavers!" I exclaim, the word a splash of cold water. Weavers steal naughty children from their beds at night—or so I've heard from the older boys who like teasing us younglings. I've never heard Ma mention Weavers before. "Aren't they just in the stories? They sound so . . . evil."

"Weavers are neither," Ma replies sharply, and then adds, much softer, "Don't believe those stories, Yunny."

I nod, fidgeting a little, settling back into place.

Ma exhales, turning back to the hearth. "Eronda prospered under the guidance of Pillars, with Weavers aiding them. But then, three centuries ago . . ."

She trails off, staring at the fire.

"What happened?" I nearly yell the question, leaning forward to try and meet her gaze. "What happened three hundred years ago?"

Ma sits quietly for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. Then she turns to me, her eyes sharpening, taking on a rueful gleam. "I shall tell you the rest of the story another time."

"NO!" I roar.

Ma smiles, but it holds no joy. "I want you to stay my little boy for a while longer."

Broph's words echo in my ears. "I'm nearly fourteen. I can't stay a boy forever," I groan. Ma leans away from me, shock rippling across her face. "Of course not. But you don't need to race headlong into a world you don't understand."

"I would understand it better if you'd finish your stories," I say sullenly. "Maybe then the other boys wouldn't pick on me so much."

Hurt flashes across her eyes. "I only do what I think is best for you, Aeyun. You've never had a problem with it before."

I run a hand along my ribs, feeling the bruising beneath my shirt. "Well . . . I've changed."

She studies me apprehensively. "How about this—when it's time to choose a guild to apprentice to, I'll finish that story. And I promise we will have a long conversation about what your future looks like."

I sit with it for a moment, but I know full well that she won't budge; I'd be better off trying to convince an oak to move.

"Fine," I say, defeated. "But I'm not going to bed on an unfinished story. If you're not going to finish that one, tell me the story of the two moons"—I pout—"please."

She grins. "Alright. That's only fair."

Ma begins recounting the story, an old favourite, but I fade to sleep before she reaches the end.

2

I wake to the sound of pots clanging and Ma singing quietly to herself in the kitchen. The smell of burning wood fills the cottage, informing me that the hearth has already been stoked.

Ma pokes her head around my door, looking in at me. "Up and dress, Yunny," she orders. "We're heading to town this morning. Sixth-day market."

I drag myself from bed, pull on my clothes, and lace my boots. When I venture into the kitchen, Ma is already wrapping her wood carvings in linen, tucking them carefully into a satchel. After the carvings, she packs small vials of dye. Then, finally, she places nine glass jars of apple chutney in a neat line on the table and checks that each lid is secure before depositing them in another bag.

I help Ma with the making of the chutney and dye whenever I can. The wood carvings, however, are all hers. She has a small storehouse behind our cottage—which she calls her sanctuary—and she disappears into it most days to work on her pieces.

There is no learning hall in Edge, which means that all children under the age of fourteen have considerable freedom to their days. Most are expected to help with household chores, but once they're complete, they're left with the rest of the day to play. I keep myself busy by helping guild masters with errands, or assisting nearby farmers with harvesting and livestock whenever Ma has no tasks for me. The rest of

the time, I head for the Darkwood; if I were to go into town alone, all that would happen is more bullying.

Ma turns to me with a solemn expression and lowers her voice. "Ready for a mighty quest, my good sir?"

I stamp my foot and salute. "Yes, Milady, I shall escort you to town."

We both laugh and Ma asks, "And who are you this morning Yunny?"

Ma has been the only person to ever cherish my characters the same way I do. In the past, whenever I shared them with the kids in town I was ridiculed; it's why I prefer to be alone. The events of yesterday flicker at the edge of my mind, but I quickly push them aside, embracing the character already bubbling to the surface of my imagination.

"Today, I am Shorva Thunder," I declare. "Fearsome huntress. Bodyguard to the queen."

"And who might this queen be?" she asks.

"You, my liege! I won't leave your side."

Ma laughs again. "Alright, my huntress. Your first duty is to help me carry these wares." She lifts two satchels and hands me one.

I groan.

We step out into the morning, greeted by the burgeoning light of a new day. Our cottage sits at the border of Edge, right on the doorstep of the Darkwood, and we set off toward town at an easy pace.

I watch Ma as we walk. She's tall and slender, with long dark hair that shines magnificently in the sun. It's the same colour as mine, though mine is much shorter, the tips brushing the tops of my shoulders, while hers falls nearly to her waist.

We share much of the same face. The same bright green eyes, the colour of river moss in summer. The same distinct jawlines and high cheekbones. We also share the same lean, slender bodies, like sharpened knives. The only real difference between us is our noses: mine flat and broad, where hers is thin and long.

I know the men of Edge find her attractive. They always have. They linger when she passes, invent reasons to speak with her, stand a little closer than necessary. It doesn't hurt, I suppose. Ma is an artist,

providing for us with the coin her wood carvings bring in from the market; many men pay a fine price for her carvings, often, I think, in an effort to impress her. But despite their attempts to charm or woo her, Ma has never shown interest in any of them.

She's never spoken of my da either. Whenever I ask, something in her stills. Her eyes glaze over, her voice softens, and she says only that he would be proud of me. Once, I asked Broph if he knew anything about my da. He shrugged and said Ma arrived alone, me just a babe in her arms, not even a turn old—before that, he had no idea. He'd never enquired for her story, said that it wasn't his place to pry into what Illaine chose not to share.

Not having a da bothered me a lot when I was younger. All the other boys in town had one, and they never let me forget that I was different, that I was lacking. But over the years, the jagged edge of those insults rounded themselves to dullness, and I grew tired of chasing answers.

Ma catches me watching her. "Mighty warrioress, Shorva Thunder," she says with a grin. "Do I look presentable enough to walk beside a heroine of your renown?"

I straighten and puff out my chest. "Only just, Milady."

She laughs. "Then lead on, oh mighty one."

The walk to town is suffused with the first signs of spring; bright flecks of gold, pink and blue dot the land where early flowers rise from their winter slumber. We cross an open field, steam lifting from the ground where sunlight kisses it, leeching moisture skyward. Birds sing in the distance and my spirits echo their tune. The morning's magic allows me to forget the terrible moment from yesterday. We crest a rise at the far end of the field and look down into the shallow hollow where Edge resides.

Edge sprawls out in all directions, noise already bubbling up from the market and shopfronts coming to life at its centre. The town is much like the people who live in it: plain, sturdy and steady. The houses are made of timber and stone, huddled close together, like they're whispering to one another.

While it may not be stunning to look at, and I'm scared to go in alone, Edge is still my home, and it's wonderful in many ways. I've heard travellers at the inn call it quiet—amongst other things—but I always found that curious. To me, Edge is anything but.

Travellers don't know old man Bray, who crafts toys for the kids and always has a story to tell. Or Tymm, the blacksmith's son, who practically yells every word and never shuts up. They don't know how, on First-day through Fifth, you can hear the timber mill from anywhere in town, buzzing like a beehive as the men who work it saw the wood that Edge is renowned for. They don't know old Tosie Faybah, who cusses you out of her yard if you stray too close.

No. Edge isn't quiet. You just have to know how to listen.

We descend the rise, stepping on to the trade road at its bottom. If you turned right and followed the road, you'd eventually reach Myrwood. We turn left, however, making for the town square, and the Sixth-day market.

"Do we need anything from the market today?" I ask, treading along the edge of a rut left by a wagon wheel, pretending I'm walking the lip of a cliff. "Or are we only selling?"

"Thread," Ma replies. "And if Elvie's sold out again, I'll be cross with you."

"Me?"

"You used the last of my thread tying that fake sword to your back."

"It wasn't fake. It was Kregorius the Great's longsword."

She rolls her eyes and smirks. "It was a broom handle, Yunny."

"A mighty one," I mutter.

The town square is already bustling with people by the time we reach it, a patchwork of sound and movement. We walk past the blacksmith's forge, and I feel its heat race over me—Rukas's hammer and anvil already hard at work.

"Looks like we're just in time for one of the good stalls," Ma announces, her eyes scanning the square.

A good stall is one that sits beneath an awning of a surrounding building. If you arrive too late, you're relegated to a stall without cover,

and it can be a long day in the sun or rain. Some regulars have a favourite spot, and will near cry murder if another claims it before they arrive. But Ma has never shown any attachment to a particular spot; she just wants to sell her wares and doesn't mind where that takes place.

We claim a stall, right beside Mada Lewon, her sweet-smelling soaps and candles piled high. Mada gives us a quick nod, already busy with a customer. We lay our goods out, wood carvings at the front, dyes to one side, and chutney jars at the rear.

People drift through the square, some pausing to browse, others lingering to talk. I spot Broph across the square and he gives me a nod before hefting a heavy sack over his shoulder and continuing on his way.

The day rolls on steadily, the market bustling with energy, customers coming and going. I stay out of the way mostly, helping Ma whenever she asks for aid, her purse swelling as her wares dwindle. I study her while she works; the way she tilts her head slightly when listening, how she radiates warmth whenever a customer ventures toward our stall. She has a quiet gravity that pulls people in. They don't notice it, but I do; I hope to be like her one day.

I leave her for a moment, snaking my way through the crowd toward Elvie's thread stall. I manage to replace the last of the red I used—paying a single silver for a new ball—and after a brief exchange I return to Ma.

When I arrive, Ma is bartering with a trader from Trobast—the region that borders us to the east—over one of her carvings. A large wolf, about the size of two fists pressed together, its head thrown back in a snarl.

"You drive a hard bargain," the man is saying, turning the carving over in his hands. "But your work is exquisite. It's as if you've trapped a wolf in wood."

He purchases the carving and the day drifts on, unremarkable and slow. The hum of voices rising and falling, coins changing hands, sunlight edging its way across the square. I'm sitting on an old crate

behind the stall, gripped by boredom, when something in the market shifts, laughter fading and conversations trailing off as murmurs ripple outward, hushed and uncertain.

I lift my head to peer over the stall and see folk turning and staring; naturally I follow their gaze. At the far end of the square, where the trade road spills into the market, a group of figures appears. The crowd parts before them.

Leading the group is Mayor Thorne. He has a neatly trimmed beard that shines with far too much oil and he walks as though his spine has been replaced with an iron rod. But it isn't him the people are watching.

Behind him march five men, all clad in a deep black uniform that seems to drink in the sunlight, fitted with dark hoods that shroud their faces in shadow. Their black uniforms are intimidating—thigh-length tunics, linen trousers, solid leather boots—but it's their armour that truly sets them apart from the soldiers I've seen before. No, their armour is something else entirely, immediately drawing my gaze.

Rather than a soldier's typical steel plate, these men wear armour on their chest and arms made from hardened leather: close-fitted, sleek and precise, joints left bare for movement. But it's not the leather that's impressive, it's what's attached to it. Each section has a thin plate of solid translucent crystal fixed upon it, curved to fit their bodies, catching sunlight in sharp flashes.

My mouth falls open when I see that the swords strapped at their waists are made of the same substance as their armour; except where their armour is polished, this crystal is raw, unhoused by a scabbard, translucent from pommel to tip.

These are no ordinary soldiers. They move like wolves, silent and sure. And painted upon their leather breastplates, visible through the crystal: a clenched fist, stark white against the black of their uniform.

I stand frozen, awe gripping me tight. It seems to have claimed everyone else as well, if the silence is anything to go by. I try to draw my eyes away, but the shining crystal the men wear holds my gaze in a vice.

"What's that armour?" I ask Ma in a hushed tone.

"Aether crystal," she replies in a whisper, voice low so only I can hear.

"Like the Aether in your story?" I blurt. "Where does it come from?"

"It's mined from deep beneath the mountains in Shilte."

Shilte. I know it: one of the five regions that form Eronda. Stonespire is its beating heart, the capital—where the King lives. The other four regions have their own capitals and ruling lords, but all swear fealty to Shilte. What I know of Erondan geography and governance came from a travelling cartographer who had spent several spans in Edge when I was younger.

"Is it magic?" I ask Ma.

Ma shakes her head. "Not like the Aether in my story."

I stare at the men in awe.

Mayor Thorne's voice rings out, shattering the stillness that has taken over the square. "People of Edge, it is my great honour and privilege to welcome our esteemed guests—Warriors of the Fist, guardians of Eronda. Shilte's most revered military unit."

The men in black don't move, standing like statues as Mayor Thorne introduces them.

"Their presence here is no small matter," the mayor continues. "They arrive on official orders. Let us extend them every courtesy while they remain amongst us."

A murmur spreads through the crowd like wildfire.

I've never heard of the Fist, but the sight of them stirs something in me. Everyone in the square treats them with admiration: stepping aside as they pass, nodding their heads respectfully. These men look like the heroes from my stories made real, the kind of men who don't tolerate bullies. The kind of men who can defeat a horde of demons.

"Ma," I whisper, still watching them. "Who are the Fist?"

She doesn't answer at first. When I turn to her, her face is still, serious in a way I rarely see. With a hard edge to her tone, she murmurs, "Shilte's agents of death."

I glance back at the men in black as they follow Mayor Thorne from the square. "They look like heroes."

Ma scowls. "They may be the deadliest fighters in all of Eronda, Yunny, but they're no heroes. Them being here isn't cause for celebration. It's a warning."

"A warning?"

She looks down at me, her lips pressed firmly together. "They don't show up when times are good."

I watch the black-clad warriors move through the square, effortlessly parting the crowd. I trust Ma, but the way they walk, the way people treat them, has me entranced "Do you think . . . do you think I could ever be one of them?"

Ma looks at me for a long moment, her eyes unreadable. "Come," she says at last. "Help me pack up what's left. I've sold nearly everything anyway, it's time we go home."

I collect what's remaining—a single wood carving and three pots of dye—placing them in a satchel. Ma beckons for me to follow as she departs the square.

On the way home, Ma hums a tune under her breath and I match her stride for stride as we follow the familiar route home—along the trade road then across the fields. The entire trip I think about the warriors: their faces shadowed by hoods, the way their crystal armour shone in the sun, the blades they carried. It's intoxicating.

We reach our cottage just as the sun begins to lose itself in the tops of the mighty oaks, the temperature dropping with its departure.

I open our gate and hold it for Ma.

"Still Shorva Thunder?" she asks, tousling my hair as she walks past.

"No," I say, stifling a yawn. The travel and excitement of the day have finally worn me down. "She's gone for now."

"Naw. Who do I have the pleasure of accompanying me now, then?"

"No one special," I reply, holding back another yawn as we cross the yard. "Just Aeyun Dawns."

She pauses in the doorway, one hand on the frame. "Well," she says with a smile, "I hope he's good at peeling potatoes."



After supper, we move to the settle before the hearth again; the fire crackling softly as I curl my legs beneath me, warmth seeping into my bones. We talk over the day's events. Or rather, *I* talk.

All I want to speak about are the Fist warriors: their crystal armour and swords, the way the crowd parted for them, the way they moved. Ma listens, nodding occasionally, but I get the feeling she's not as interested as I am, and I drop the subject.

"Have you got another story?" I ask coaxingly.

She smirks and says, "If I had a gold coin for every time you asked me that, I'd be richer than the King." She chuckles. "How about a poem instead?"

"Yes, please," I say quickly. I love her poems just as much as her stories.

Her eyes glint with a familiar spark. "Do you know what the Wind of Change is, Yunny?"

I shake my head.

"Well, the Wind of Change is a magical wind, and if you're caught in its flow, your entire destiny can shift in the blink of an eye." She clicks her fingers. "Knowledge of the Wind has faded. Folk stopped believing in it. But let me tell you, son of mine, it is real. And let this warning not be lost on you."

She pauses for a moment, then begins her poem.

"Not all winds are forged the same.
Some bring mercy, some bring flame.
But there is a wind unlike the rest,
And when it comes, lives are put to test.
From whence it blows, no soul can say,

But when it blows, fates do sway.
This strange wind, does not brush skin
It cuts past flesh, and dives within.
Neither beggar, merchant, nor crowned king
Can avoid the change, this wind will bring.
They name this breath, the Wind of Change,
For when it blows, fates rearrange.
So, remember this poem, and beware this breeze
Because upon you, it just may seize."

She smiles softly, then brushes my hair back, kissing the top of my head.

"Do you think the wind will ever find us?" I ask, my skin prickling.

"Unfortunately," she says under her breath, "it comes for us all, sooner or later."

3

A few spans pass, the days lengthening as spring arrives fully, the sun shifting higher and higher into the sky. Life in Edge continues much the same as before; I have no further incidents with bullies or explosions, and even though I'm now extra vigilant when entering the Darkwood, the lingering fear from that day fades like the final note of a bard's song.

I love it when the days lengthen, for it allows me to spend longer outside. Often, though, I get so engrossed in my fantasies that I lose track of time, and nightfall sneaks up on me, catching me unaware. It is this exact situation I find myself in right now. One moment I had been Alva-Yor—Defender of Light—on a mission to save the world from an evil necromancer. The next I had been Aeyun Dawns—a boy soon to be chided by his mother—out too late in the Darkwood.

The last of the day's light is dissolving, and a few stars have begun to shimmer above me as darkness engulfs the forest. I leap over a twisted root as I run home—fuelled by anxiety—hoping for safe ground on the other side. Landing safely, I continue my charge, bursting through low branches with my arms crossed above my head like a shield. The space around me opens suddenly and the ground hardens beneath my feet, the path to my cottage presenting itself. I breathe a sigh of relief as I look to the left and spot the light I knew would be there—home. As I walk briskly along the path toward it, I try not to imagine the scolding I'm going to receive from Ma for being late.

I'm at the edge of the clearing where our cottage resides when I hear something. A sound from somewhere in the trees. Not loud, not clear. Just . . . strange and out of place. I freeze, holding my breath as I listen for it again. I hear the wind rustling through leaves, the trill of a far off bird as it settles in for the night, and my own heartbeat. But nothing else.

I wait a few more moments—still no sound. Just a trick of the imagination I tell myself; the Darkwood often makes peculiar sounds at night. But when I take one step toward the cottage, I hear it again, much closer. I freeze, dropping into a crouch, pressing myself against the trunk of an oak. I know I didn't imagine it this time. I'm not alone.

My mind churns as I seek the source of the sound. It's impossible to see anything in the forest, the light from the cottage too weak to reach this far. A voice in my head keeps shouting, *timber dragon,* and I search desperately for the shape of the creature I know must be there.

The approaching sound grows louder, and my heart thumps in my chest—until a hazy light appears through the foliage. I calm instantly. It must be someone from town carrying a lantern, though why they're visiting us this late, I have no idea.

I silently berate myself for thinking we were in danger. Then, from out of the forest, a figure appears, and my pulse surges once more. It's human, I think. Or at least it has a human body. It isn't the shape that has me unable to identify it—it's the fact that its skin glows purple. Wait—no. Not skin. Armour. Armour shining with a deep purple light from within.

It's unlike anything I've ever seen, even more impressive than the crystal armour of the Fist warriors. As the figure comes closer, I see that the armour encompasses them entirely, including a featureless helm encircling their head. I squint, searching for seams in the armour, for joints where one plate meets another, for straps and buckles—anything that will reveal how it has been crafted. I'm shocked to find none—the entire suit appears to be crafted from a single piece of material.

"Magic," I breathe, struggling to make sense of it.

The armoured figure makes directly for our cottage. Judging by their build—tall, lean, muscular—I presume it's a man. He reaches our fence and leaps it in a single bound. Terror floods me then, like water filling my lungs.

I burst from my hiding position, sprinting across the clearing, boots slipping on dew. I watch as the man steps onto the porch, crossing it in a single stride. He lifts a glowing boot and slams it into the wooden door, kicking it clean off its hinges.

A scream tears through the darkness, emanating from inside—Ma. I'm almost at the cottage when her voice cuts through the air. "Stay away!"

I stop dead, certain her words are directed at me, though I'm unsure how. Our woodpile is beside me, and I drop behind it, chest heaving, breath shallow, heart hammering. I lift my head and peer over the stacked logs toward the cottage. Light spills through the windows and shadows move across the walls inside.

The glowing man moves to the centre of the room and my stomach twists as I see Ma standing before him. Her face is hard, jaw set, lips curled into a snarl. She doesn't look afraid. She looks ready to fight, and when she speaks, her voice is sharp with contempt. "How did you find me, Grathen?"

"I have hunted your clan for centuries, Illaine," the man responds conversationally, his voice muffled but audible beneath the helm. "You hid yourself well, out here, on the fringe of the world. It took me a long time to trace your steps. But time, fortunately, is one thing I have. You should have known there was nowhere you could hide that I would not find you."

"Using Aether to extend your life is a perversion of our power," Ma hisses in disgust.

"Your line has always been righteous," Grathen sneers, circling her. "Even separated by generations, it feels as though I converse with Bethandia. When I kill you, everything she did will be for nothing."

"What you're looking for isn't here." Ma barks a laugh. "You came all this way and still you have failed."

Grathen stills. "That's impossible. I tortured many Plainlanders to get your name—the same Plainlanders that told me Bethandia's line ends with you."

"I have a sister," Ma says, smiling. "It was passed to her, not me. I don't know where she is, but even if I did, I would die before telling you."

"You lie!" Grathen roars, punching a wall, timber splintering beneath his gauntlet. "You know where she is!"

"I came here alone," Ma informs him, her voice unwavering, and her eyes flick toward the window, toward me. It is the smallest of movements, but I catch it. And it's then that I understand: she's hiding me. "I haven't had contact with my clan in turns."

Ma's words are met with silence; the glowing man simply stands before her, unmoving.

"I believe you," he says after a time. The anger has drained from his voice, leaving only a cold detachment. "Which means our time together has come to an end."

Out of thin air, a blade appears in his grip. Not one of steel, nor crystal like the Fist—this sword is made of pure starlight, blazing with a powerful silver radiance, pulsing like it's alive. My eyes bulge at the sight of it.

He raises the luminous blade. "Before you die, know this," he says, his voice devoid of emotion. "I will rid the world of every member of your family until I find it. Your resistance is meaningless."

The man's words terrify me, but I resist the urge to intervene, aware that Ma wants me to stay hidden.

Ma exhales, then turns both palms up. I gasp as light gathers in her hands—the same impossible starlight that burns in Grathen's blade—swelling brighter and brighter.

Her right hand clenches, and the silver light elongates, solidifying to form a blade. Light moves in her left hand too, a second blade forming until she wields twin blades of glowing starlight.

I'm frozen. Who is the woman that raised me? *What* is she?

"I am a Pillar," Grathen declares. "Without her key, you cannot hope to stand against me."

"You were once defeated by an old woman," Ma mocks. "You do not frighten me."

Grathen doesn't reply. He simply raises his sword, his purple armour pulsing in response.

Then they move, colliding in the centre of the room with a thunderous crack. Blade meets blade, and light explodes within the cottage. They withdraw from each other, before they each thrust a hand full of light forward, orbs launching simultaneously. The glowing spheres collide mid-air and the explosion flows outward in a concussive wave, hurling chairs, splintering the table, the lantern resting upon it falling to the floor and shattering, spreading hot oil which quickly catches on the timber. Smoke begins to rise in the cottage, but if either combatant notices, they pay it no attention.

The two of them converge again, Ma's blades flashing in arcs, moving too fast for my eyes to follow. She fights with fury; each strike launched with frightening strength. Grathen answers every blow, refusing to yield any ground to her, light sparking every time their blades collide. He swings his sword in a wide arc, and Ma catches it with one blade, driving her other toward him. The thrust glances off his armour, leaving a blackened line along its surface. Grathen steps back, his sword winking out of existence. He raises both hands and three orbs form in the air before him. He fires them simultaneously, and they hurtle through the air toward Ma.

She raises her hand, and a barrier of light rises in front of her. The first orb collides with it, cracking the shield. The second lands a heartbeat later, rending large fissures in it. The third arrives, punching through. Ma dives aside as it sails past her, colliding with the hearth and obliterating it.

Fire spreads quickly now, rising in intensity, the cottage becoming a furnace. Ma raises both her hands and begins gathering light between them—forming the largest orb I've seen yet—and she punches her arms forward, launching it at Grathen.

He raises his left arm, and I watch in amazement as his vambrace turns liquid, flowing outward, forming a shield. The orb connects with it and detonates, rattling the entire cottage, the force of the blast propelling Grathen through the far wall in an explosion of stone and timber.

He lands hard on the ground outside and rolls to a stop. Ma steps through the hole in the wall left by him, her head turning, searching. Her eyes find me and widen in horror.

Run, she silently mouths.

Grathen rises and Ma's eyes leave me as she pivots to him. They square off at the front of the cottage, separated by the path that leads from gate to porch. The fire consuming the cottage casts a strange, horrible flickering light on them. I am only ten paces away, hidden in shadow behind the woodpile. I know Ma told me to run, but I can't—I *won't* leave her.

I'm not sure my limbs would move anyway.

The fight resumes as both combatants continue hurling orbs at one another, colliding mid-air, creating a light show of exploding projectiles. Walls of light rise and shatter in rapid succession. I can only watch—too terrified to move—as Ma stands valiantly against her assailant. The fight seems evenly poised until Grathen feigns left, and Ma overcommits. He slips inside her guard, palm slamming against her chest, light exploding.

The blast lifts Ma from her feet and she hurtles across the yard, rolling a few times before getting her hands beneath her. She presses off the ground and gets to her knees—but Grathen moves at an impossible speed and, just as she straightens, he drives his blade of starlight through her chest.

The world goes silent.

Ma's blades flicker and vanish. Grathen stands over her for what feels like forever, before pulling his sword free, the blade vanishing from existence. Blood immediately begins running from the hole in her chest, racing down her stomach and thighs to pool on the ground

at her knees. She coughs, and more blood appears at the corners of her mouth, trickling downward.

She looks up, across the yard—at me. And somehow, in this moment, through all her pain, she smiles. A small, quiet smile. Then her eyes close, and she falls forward onto the ground, into death's embrace.

I don't scream. I can't. The sound is trapped somewhere deep in my chest. A wind picks up, brushing lightly across my face. I barely feel it. I don't understand what I'm seeing. My mind reaches for it, slowly trying to grasp it, the understanding of the moment unfurling in my mind—Ma is . . . gone.

Grathen bends down, grabbing her with his gauntleted hands. He lifts her as though she weighs nothing and tosses her into the raging fire that was my home. I let out a small whimper, and Grathen's head snaps around. I drop my head instantly, and listen as he takes a slow step toward the woodpile. Then another. I press myself hard against the stacked wood, peering through a gap in the split logs. He stops on the other side of the timber and my heart pounds so loudly I'm sure it will give me away. I hold my breath, every muscle in my body rigid, toes curled so hard they ache.

A large crack sounds somewhere off to the right in the Darkwood, and Grathen's head turns toward it. He takes a step away from the woodpile, pivoting, then surges into a run. I listen to his footfalls fade before peeking around the logs, watching as the glowing purple light of his armour disappears into the forest.

I wait a while longer before rising slowly, discovering the cottage that I'd lived in my entire life now engulfed in flame, timber popping and cracking as the fire licks hungrily at what's left.

I walk slowly toward the burning wreckage of my home, hoping Ma will appear from the rubble, alive and well. But the heat becomes too much, forcing me to stop. I stand still, unable to search for her. All I can do is gaze upon the inferno as dread suffocates me.