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Silver, Blood and Singing

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SILVER, BLOOD AND SINGING

By

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B.A. Marshall University, 2016

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2019

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SILVER, BLOOD AND SINGING

By Zachary Posey

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Gregory Howard

An Abstract of the Thesis/Dissertation Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts

(in English)

May 2019

Silver Blood and Singing is a portion of a novel. This thesis is an exploration of blurring the lines between science fiction and fantasy. Within these pages I explore the concept of grief and mourning as a thematic way to blur this space further. This thesis consists of the first several acts of a novel following two sisters and those around them as they try to come to terms with their grief. Along this journey they end up being opened up to worlds more dangerous and stranger than any they have come across before. As they explore these new worlds this functions as a place to examine the understanding of what it means to be a person and how to discern what's even real.

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CHAPTER 1

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

J.R.R. Tolkien and his *Lord of the Rings* is often credited with the creation of the fantasy genre. Tolkien created a mythology of his own based strongly from the mythologies he had studied, from looking back at history and myth to create his Middle-Earth. Many fantasy authors have followed Tolkien's tradition of a heavily pseudo-medieval setting. This has seemed to become a common trend in fantasy works across the past several decades. Yet as one of my favorite fantasy authors, N.K. Jemisin once said, "Epic fantasy is not merely what Tolkien made it. This genre is rooted in the epic-and the truth is that there are plenty of epics out there which feature people like me. Sundiata's badass mother. Dihya, warrior queen of the Amazighs...Hatshepsut's reign. Everything Harriet Tubman ever did...how can I not use every building-block of my history and heritage and imagination when I make shit up?" Jemisin notes an important truth, there is so much epic material across cultures. To limit fantasy is to limit ourselves in what we can learn and experience. Fantasy is the work of imagination and why should imagination only be limited to certain cultures over others?

One need only look to N.K Jemisin's own *Broken Earth* series or Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* to see excellent examples of how fantasy has evolved. Each draw from various experiences outside of the European tradition, for example Adeyemi's fantasy is built primarily off of West African mythology. Fantasy tends to look to the past to discover fundamental truths about humanity and every culture has its own past.

By evolving to incorporate more experiences, fantasy can only get better as it strengthens the abilities of our imaginations. *Silver, Blood and Singing* does draw with some of the tropes of a more industrial European tradition, like manor houses and street lamps, however many of the more unique aspects of *Silver, Blood and Singing* is where it draws inspiration from nonEuropean cultures. For example, the culture of the Firstborn and the Fledgling Circle are heavily drawn from Egyptian practices, mythology, religious behaviors and temples. By incorporating epic elements from across cultures it becomes stronger and more meaningful work.

N.K. Jemisin is a fantastic example of how fantasy can evolve to be better. In 2013 Jemisin called out the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America for its support of a misogynist, white supremacist author, Theodore Beale. Subsequently the society expelled Beale from its midst. The diverse work of her fantasy created a platform for her to make science fiction and fantasy better by calling out some of its faults, shortcomings. Jemisin has gone on to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel, three years in a row (2016, 2017, 2018) illustrating that not only is this evolving of fantasy to include more diverse cultures necessary, it is a strong example of the best of fantasy.

One of the ways that my work has been inspired by Jemisin is to similarly incorporate every building-block of my history to make my work stronger. As a member of the LGBT community I can see how heteronormativity is still highly the norm in fantasy. There are notable LGBT fantasy inclusive authors, but these are more often the exception than the rule.

Part of the work of *Silver, Blood and Singing* is how it creates a world of LGBT inclusivity. One of the novel's leading protagonist's is a lesbian and one of the main plot points is her trying to come to terms with what happened to her fiancé. The book does not simply put LGBT characters in as a token character but is interested in a similar evolution of fantasy that Jemisin is creating. One where LGBT individuals can be seen as fully realized characters that can take center stage. Just as Jemisin's inclusion of diverse mythologies in her work gives her a platform to make fantasy better, the diverse sexual cultures of *Silver, Blood and Singing* can enable imaginations to create even more diverse and wonderful works of fantasy fiction.

Silver, Blood and Singing is not strictly interested in being only a piece of fantasy fiction however. *Silver, Blood and Singing* takes much of its inspiration from the ideas of science fiction as well. The best explanation for science fiction that I'm fond of is Isaac Asimov's quote, "Science fiction can be defined as that branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology". Science fiction is very interested in the questions that surround how we should interact with incredible, life changing technologies.

Silver, Blood, and Singing is strongly attempting to bridge this gap to operate in a space that is both fantasy and science fiction. One example would be how portals work in this piece of fiction. There is the genre of portal fantasy and the uses of portals across science fiction that is one example of how this book attempts to navigate this space. I find this an important way to evolve past genres. There is so often this categorization of certain tropes as strictly "fantasy" or "science fiction" yet by blurring these lines can lead to some of the more unique works of fiction.

Star Wars could be seen as an example of how blurring these lines can create something new and fantastic. Star Wars took the common fantasy trope of “swords” and translated it into a science fiction setting creating the lightsaber, a symbol that has captured film audiences for multiple generations by this point. Portals in fantasy are traditionally used as a way to escape from a seemingly boring life. This escape into another world is one of the draws of fantasy writing. I was first introduced to fantasy by C.S. Lewis and his *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, where four children discover a wardrobe that functions as a portal to the magical land of Narnia. The portal is in essence a doorway to a different, more magical world. Lewis Carroll’s work *Alice in Wonderland* is also one of the fundamental portal fantasy novels. The rabbit hole functions as a portal to the magical world of wonderland. These portals are the medium by which the characters from our mundane earth enter into a fantastic, more interesting world. This journey into the fantastic draws from traditions such as the *Journey Into the West* where the travelers move across increasingly magical new places in their journey. Yet the most fascinating portals for me were in C. S. Lewis’s, *The Magician’s Nephew*, when the two main characters come across “the wood between worlds” where theoretically they could travel into any one of a dozen universes. The main characters only travel between two worlds, but there are dozens of ponds leading to other worlds.

What could have happened if they tried more of the worlds? What would it look like to be able to casually jump from one world to another? How would society function if this multiverse travel was possible? This was one of the things I wanted to explore in *Silver, Blood*

and Singing, how would this function? This is where I first started blurring the lines between the traditional “portals” of fantasy with the way “portals” function in the science fiction tradition.

The tradition of portals in fantasy is to only escape from one world to another. In science fiction portals are often used as ways to cross long distances quickly. Andre Norton’s *Stargate* uses star gates for species to travel long distances quickly. Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion Cantos* uses farcasters for humans to travel from planet to planet. The *Doors of Silver, Blood and Singing* also function similar to this science fiction conversation as well. These were all inspirations I looked to as they had this inter-galactic travel. Yet, I was not interested in maintaining this science fiction level of advanced technology across the board. I wanted to explore what this type of technology/magic would be used and perceived by societies that were seemingly “less advanced”. The *Doors* not only function as ways to escape for the characters but also as a magical highway that enables species to communicate and travel between these universes. In this way the *Song* functions as much as a form of technology as it does magic.

This also is one of the key ways the worlds of the *Song* work with the science fiction question of how we interact with advancements in technology. The worlds of the *Song* are all connected by the *Song* which enables powerful technology. The Firstborn both introduce and have the most control this technology that drastically changes the economies and cultures of the worlds they inhabit. The *Song* very much functions as a technology the peoples of the Circle all have to react to. Most embrace the technology but the more time the readers and characters spend with the *Song* the more this technology seems as dangerous as it is useful.

Silver, Blood and Singing plays on the tradition of portal fantasy by flipping the positions of the characters further. What if our own fantastical escape becomes another world of the mundane? Many portal fantasies involve the main characters coming from our earth to another strange world. In this book there are portals, called Doors, which are ways for people to leave their world to explore fantastical places relative to their own. We may see their worlds as fantasy but for them they are the mundane worlds. Where in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* the children leave the troubles of WWII London, characters like Emeyla open portals to different worlds where she can escape from the problems of her own world, The Fledgling Circle, which she finds mundane, even though the readers may find it intriguing. One of the prominent themes across the creation of *Silver, Blood and Singing* is the idea of blurring lines around what we might interpret as reality. Sure, reality may mean one thing to the reader, but in *Silver, Blood and Singing* reality is dependent on the characters at play. What is the truth of this world? Are people coming back from the dead? Is anyone who they say they are? One world may seem more fantastic than the next, but all are meant to convey something as "off", blending the line between fact and fiction within the pages of *Silver, Blood and Singing*.

Silver, Blood and Singing continues to blend these lines of reality further as one of the prominent questions of the novel is "what makes a person their self?". This is a question that has been often asked in science fiction traditions like Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* or Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. This book asks this question several times as characters try to sort out their relationship to reality. The existence of "counterparts" across Circles is asking the same question though with magic as the catalyst for the discovery of "counterparts".

This is another way I'm attempting to bridge this gap between science fiction and fantasy. Fantasy often involves coming of age stories, where people come to realize who they are. Yet some of the people in this novel either already know who they are and are pretending actively otherwise. Others think they know who they are only to have that reality ripped away. This is an extension of the blurring of realities within the novel. Fantasy and science fiction both create new worlds using the imagination. Yet how much should we trust our view point characters into these worlds? What kinds of worlds have even been constructed? Should we trust what they "know"?

Silver, Blood and Singing asks us question our realities within the book just as mourning can lead us to question our understanding of our own reality. A lot of the book is working through the concept of mourning and this is by design. The construction of the worlds of the Song were heavily influenced by Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and *The Book of Gates*, an Ancient Egyptian funerary text both of which involve people exploring the afterlife. As such *Silver, Blood and Singing* was very much interested in exploring death and loss as well. All of the characters in this text are deeply affected by loss and death. Emeyla and Deanne both suffer the loss of their father, Vincen loses many people he cares about.

As has been previously established fantasy is primarily interested in looking back. Mourning often involves both looking over the lost one's life as well as one's own. Fantasy functions as a way to look back and see how this is a part of a long tradition of history. Death is often an integral part of fantasy, the death of the "bad" and the rebirth of "good". To look to a popular example right now, George R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* confronts death by its

savage approach to it. Life is shown as bleak in the novels and abrupt death is common. The emotional sway of unexpected deaths in the novel are cathartic in the way they allow the reader to confront this harsh reality in this fantasy world.

Another example of fantasy confronting death could be seen in the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. The novels surround Voldemort trying to escape death, he is afraid of dying. Yet, the way Harry Potter ends up beating him is by *accepting* his own mortality and embracing death as an old friend. Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* is all about death and rebirth. Fantasy has often been used as a way for readers to both confront their own mortality and come to terms with the emotional response that can come from losing those dear to us.

So it makes sense that a project like *Silver, Blood and Singing* can approach the subject of mourning so directly. As characters like Emeyla or Deanne confront their own struggles with mourning we can learn from their own experiences. At the end of the day when we leave the worlds of the Circles we can still recall the lessons and emotions from our time in the book. As all meaningful fantasy should, it should return us to our world with a renewed understanding of ourselves and how to cope with our own losses we may encounter along the road.

Similarly, this circles back around to how fantasy should evolve. Different people across the world, different cultures have different approaches to mourning. By reading about different approaches to mortality we can expand our own understanding. Part of the reason for putting LGBT characters at the center of this novel is to illustrate how people across different sexualities can love and experience loss as much as any other. By reading about the emotions

and experiences of diverse groups of people, fantasy can evolve to give a diverse platform to all types of people so we can all understand each other better across our different cultures.

CHAPTER 2

LETTERS AND SONGS

Ravenna:

Ravenna stared at the polished silver glove, a few droplets of silvery blue Song dancing around the fingertips. It was her syngfawov, more commonly known as a songweaver. That was the official term for the carefully molded silver gauntlet that she was currently wearing upon her left hand. It was very beautiful, tailored for her small wrists, a small metal glove extending up to just below her upper arm. Upon the curve where the glove ended before her elbow a small single feather was engraved into the metal. Her father had offered to order her a gold songweaver from the local songsmith, but she had insisted on a silver one instead. It did the job just as well, and was Emeyla's favorite color.

That job was harnessing the Song. The Firstborn taught the Song was the essence of life itself, built extravagant temples to it, sang hymns to it. In more practical terms, it was just that silvery blue substance that seemed to show up just about everywhere and she could use to do practically anything. At the moment the silvery blue mist was flowing around the songweaver like a lazy river. The energy of the singing pale blue mist molded itself around her clenched fingers. She unclenched her palm.

"Myles, would you open the collector?" she asked her friend nearby.

Myles was her friend, well technically he was her bodyguard, but it was easier to ignore that aspect. Right now he looked fairly humanoid, with a heavily chiseled build and stunning blonde hair.

“What if I don’t want to?” he teased back with a disarming grin as he rotated the lever on the nearby collector. As he flipped the switch the Doorhouse collector came to life. The silvery blue Song rushed out of the hourglass body of the collector arching out past the coiling metal arms that held the glass jar in place. Quickly the bright flood of blue and white spiraling mist swirled into the room. Well it was hard to tell if it looked more like mist or lightning, the way it moved and twisted in the air it constantly changed shape and direction.

“Thanks, now I don’t have to flip you on your rear as well,” Ravenna chuckled as she plunged her gloved arm into the misty Song.

Even being near the Song made every hair on her body bristle, chafing against her clothes. Her arm was already starting to feel the piercing cold as she wiggled her fingers around. Why couldn’t the Song be warm, like diving into a warm woolen blanket? No, of course it had to be like plunging a bare hand into a snowbank. Thank the First for insulated gloves. With her hand she directed the Song, drawing it into the outline of a door. After Ravenna finished sketching the crackling outline, the inside of the door frame flared up into what looked a maelstrom of blue flames.

For some reason Doors made the singing more easily heard. Even previously, Ravenna could hear the music tugging at her ears. Now the high pitched sound rushed through the room,

echoing against the walls of the Doorhouse. A strange unearthly sound, giving its name, the Syng, Song.

“I should have brought a thicker coat,” Myles complained from his place now beside her.

“For Silence sake, you can turn into a bear, stop whining.” Ravenna felt the cold as well, but it wasn’t worth complaining about. Myles winked, then white fur began to sprout on his arms.

“Well, I’m going, you can catch up when you’re good and ready,” she continued.

Ravenna looked down at her Songweaver again. Waving some of the misty Song out of the way she looked at the navigation map engraved into her gauntlet. Nine concentric circles, with small indentations spaced at different intervals depending on where one needed to go. Carefully she removed a green glowing bead from her pocket, her key to travelling between circles. In this case it would be to the Rotting Circle where her brother Vincen was working. As she locked the key in place the Song swirled from her Songweaver further connecting her with the misty door.

“Remember, we’re heading to the Rotting Circle, fifth indentation. Make sure it’s secure, unless you want to end up in the wrong place like last time,” Ravenna warned before stepping into the misty door. The Song seemed to be rising in tempo, into a mad howl. Come on, just get it over with, just takes a moment. She felt the icy touch of the void. Everything shifted around her in an instant.

Then, in another instant, she felt the warmth return to her limbs. She spread her arms out to steady herself. She had nearly fallen face first into the sand of the shore. Travelling between

Circles always disoriented her. Emeyla had told her sometimes she had the same issue, so at least she wasn't alone in this.

Ravenna let the breath rush back into her lungs. As she did she took a moment to admire the haunting beauty of the Rotting Circle. She couldn't wait to tell Emeyla about this when she got back to their own realm, the Fledgling Circle. Each Circle had its own strange charms. For this one it was the peculiar sea. Filthy, black waves darker than any water she'd ever seen before. From the water, the taste of salt and acrid oil propelled themselves into her nostrils. Ravenna would definitely be scrubbing herself down later.

As she watched, the Song condensed again a little further down the beach. From the misty blue cloud an enormous bear with rich purple fur emerged from its depths. Ravenna couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"You know I can't take you seriously when you look like that,"

"Hey, I don't make comments about your hair," Myles grumbled as he arched up onto his back paws and stretched out.

"How many times have I told you, purple is not your color?"

"I could try pink fur, but I don't know how that'd turn out."

"Try that on your own time, I don't want to deal with that eye sore."

As they continued to poke fun at each other they made their way across the sand mixed ash of the beach front. Ravenna tried to avoid the puddles of sickly green sludge that coagulated upon the path. She hoped it wasn't a long walk over to Vincen's work site.

Further along the shore the sludge began to be replaced with crumbling bricks and piles of sun bleached bones. She shuddered slightly, what kind of place was this? Ravenna could just see the edges of the tents pitched around the excavation camp though. She also recognized the man coming out to greet her. He'd grown up in the past months, he was starting to look just like her father. Perfectly combed hair, an extravagant fur coat, a gold plated songweaver on his own hand, he seemed particularly out of place in this wasteland.

"Vincen, seems life's treating you well. It's been too long," Ravenna declared as she rushed to his side grasping him tightly into a warm hug.

"And you as well," Vincen replied. He briefly gave her a pat on the back before trying to release himself from her iron tight grip.

"I see you brought Myles with you as well, good to hear. How's the family?" Vincen inquired as he wandered across the grimy dunes towards Myles.

"Doing fine. How's the excavation going? What are you mining for this time around?"

"Crew's been performing well. We've been working through a reserve of hyraxian oil, though a few members of the crew found what looks to be an old temple. I took the initiative to put a request to father in the Cerulean Circle for a few scholars to come investigate it."

“Sounds interesting. Is that why you called me out here? I’m a bit rusty on my hyraxian but I could probably parse out a few glyphs.” A new discovery was always intriguing.

“Well actually, I called you out here for a completely different reason. I needed someone I could trust to help me with dealing with the Firstborn.” Vincen whispered the last bit under his breath. Myles didn’t seem to notice. Or if he did he pretended otherwise.

“Firstborn, what’s one of them doing out here? I wouldn’t think they would like to get their wings this dirty.”

“Not just any Firstborn, the Fledgling Benefactor herself. Herself, in person.”

Ravenna struggled to believe him. When she was a child Ravenna had spent hours reading long boring lists about the shadow governors, known as Benefactors, the Firstborn instituted whenever they discovered a new circle. Officially the Benefactors were in place as protectors and advisors, though unofficially they seemed much more interested in only filling their banks. It was common knowledge though that the Benefactors tended to stay in their own realm, the Golden Circle, only emerging for special holidays, ceremonies. If she was really here, in person...

“What in nine circles would she want with you? What’d you do, kill a dignitary or something? You’re not secretly an anarchist are you?”

“Can we?” Vincen nudged a thumb at Myles suggestively. Ravenna gave a sigh.

“Myles would never betray you for questioning the Firstborn. He’s trustworthy,” she insisted, but waved away Myles dismissively.

Myles took the hint and made his way up to the worksite. Her brother continued to move down the junk encrusted dunes. Ravenna followed him, trying ignore the pervasive smell like rotten eggs. Eventually they were standing in a small cove with the harsh black sea just lapping at her feet. Vincen snapped the fingers on his glimmering golden glove and a harsh blue mist began to thicken around his songweaver forming a piece of paper. He grabbed it and handed it to Ravenna. She clutched it in her palm, reading the shimmering letters.

“I received this letter three days ago through Song post.”

Ravenna looked over at the letter intrigued. *To Master Vincen Cartier of Stonesbroke, citizen of the Lordship of Prachorn, province of the Daeyrc Circle. Vyrchillaff, Scribe of The Firstborn, our Protectors and gracious Benefactors of Nine Realms writes to inform you that the Benefactor of Daeyrc Circle, requires your leadership skills and services for the benefit of us all...* The letter went on to sing more praises and titles of the Firstborn, and informed that the Firstborn would be arriving four days from the letter’s posting.

“Those birds sure love their titles don’t they?” She teased trying to lighten the mood.

But her heart dropped in her chest. She didn’t know what to think. It was a huge honor to be invited for an audience with the Firstborn Benefactor herself. No wonder Vincen was intimidated. Her eyes read over the letter again. Then a third time clutching it so tightly it bit into her palm. Ravenna raised an eyebrow as she handed the letter back to Vincen.

“Why did they say they require *you*? I mean no offense, but just because you have some mercantile and leadership skills doesn’t mean you’re the best. Do you have any idea what they want?”

“Other than...*my leadership skills, and services*? No, no idea. I’m just as confused as you are. I didn’t want to bring this up at the worksite though. You never question the Firstborn’s intent around mixed company. You’re the scholar in the family, not me. If anyone can help me navigate this situation, you can.”

“Vincen, I’m flattered, but I don’t think-”

“All I’m asking is that you attend the meeting with me. I need someone I know I can trust there with me.”

He was clearly over-reacting. But of course she had to agree to his request. He was of course her brother.

Later that day, despite Myles’ best efforts as they sat around the campfire Ravenna was still lost in her thoughts. Ever since she had first seen her brother’s letter it had been on her mind. What did the Firstborn want from him? Why wasn’t he more excited to be given such an honor? She kicked up a little sand into the fire frustrated. She needed someone else to talk to, someone she could trust as well. Vincen wouldn’t like her sharing, but she needed to clear her mind.

Eventually she ended up compromising with herself. She stood up and made her way into Vincen's tent. It was simple enough, a well-organized bundle of books and ledgers arranged against several tables. A well creased bed, she could see her brother's habit of eating fruit in bed had left a few stains on the blanket. Next to the bed was a well-worn ledger. Ravenna stopped at one of the tables to find a fountain pen and some blank paper. She began to scribble a letter.

Emeyla,

You've been making deliveries for nearly a month now-I'm missing you so much. I heard Deanne finally finished her apprenticeship with Elpen. You must have been so proud when you heard the news. Soon she'll be giving your father competition for his own business. Like I wrote you the other night, Vincen's had me join him the seventh circle, you know, the one that smells like a toilet? Song be praised if I never have to come here again soon. But here's the twist- the reason why he called me here is because the Firstborn Benefactor-yes, in person-wants to recruit him for something. I'm very excited for him-though of course nervous as well. I'll write more as I learn more. Can't wait to see you again at the Festival of Flowers in a couple weeks!

Sending all of my love,

R.

As she finished up writing the letter she wrapped it tightly with a string. Then flipping the small switch on her Songweaver she released just the slightest bit of captured Song. Gingerly she

placed the letter into the small vortex that formed. It lapped it up greedily before speeding off towards its destination.

It wasn't until morning came around that she got a response. A whirling vortex of silvery blue Song humming up behind her ear. Ravenna plucked the still forming letter out of the air. She put down the juicy snuffruit she had been munching on and opened it up to read its contents. Vincen was yawning between bites of a muffin beside her. The doors of the tent were brushed aside and Myles stuck his head in.

"Ravenna, Master Vincen, the Firstborn acolyte has arrived."

"This soon? I was hoping they'd wait until afternoon at least," Vincen replied looking up. He involuntarily crushed his muffin in his hand. The crumbs sprinkled across his fur coat.

"No worries." Ravenna shoved the letter into her pocket, "We'll be there shortly. Where is the acolyte?"

"The dunes outside of camp I've been informed," Myles helpfully supplied.

Ravenna smiled at him. She looked at her brother. He gave her a reluctant grin before standing up.

"Alright, time to get this over with then."

"Not yet," Ravenna batted the crumbs off his coat, "You can't meet the Benefactor with crumbs in your shirt!"

She double-checked herself in the bedside mirror. Her hair looked fine, a bit of a mess from sleeping on the floor. Her clothes were a bit dusty too, she tried to wipe some of the black sand off her pants. Finally, somewhat underdressed she followed her brother outside of the tent.

The camp was pitched like most work sites. The sleeping quarters had been set up to the northeast corner, cooking fire northwest, and their navigation equipment splashed across tables towards the southeast. They were heading for the gate though. Myles followed close behind shaped as an over-eager squirrel this morning. He could have easily fit on her shoulder if she let him. Sometimes it was strange how easily he could manipulate his size and shape to whatever he desired for a given day.

Soon they were back onto the shifting, stinking dunes. Just outside of the camp stood a grim faced man. Dressed in a peculiar suit of all black, it was clear he was of a different caliber than the white cloaked acolytes Ravenna was more used to seeing at the Temple Embassy. Although he wasn't devoid of the signature white she associated with the Firstborn. The man's face and hands were exposed and they seemed to pulsate with a white glow, as if he had been infused with lightning.

"Master Vincen Cartier of Stonesbroke, citizen of the Lordship of Prachorn, province of the Daeyrc Circle, and this is your sister, Mistress Ravenna Cartier presumably?"

"Y-yes." Vincen stumbled over the word. Ravenna didn't blame him for being nervous. She glanced around though. This was clearly not the Benefactor. Perhaps she had decided to send a representative after all? Or was she simply late?

“This one has been tasked with escorting you two to the Illustrious Benefactor and Protector of the Daeyrc Circle, or as you’re fond of calling it, the Fledgling Circle. I see Myles, citizen of Elder Katlyyn, province of Cerulean Circle however is not invited to this meeting. He will need to stay here. You two do know proper etiquette for greeting an established Benefactor?”

Ravenna hastily bowed, “Of course, forgive our rudeness. How should we address you?”

“One of this rank is addressed as Prevailer. Are we ready to depart?”

“Depart?” Vincen questioned, “Respectfully, I thought the Benefactor was to meet us personally, here.”

“Indeed, the Benefactor and Protector of the Daeyrc Circle is to meet with you, however not *here*. If the gentleman and lady shall each grab a hand.”

. The Prevailer flashed a pocket watch from one hand. Satisfied with the reading he nodded and Ravenna following instructions, firmly gripped his extended hand. She nudged her brother, who immediately took the other.

The ground seemed to fall out from underneath Ravenna. She felt nauseous as if she was tumbling through a long tunnel. Then she blinked. Her stomach heaved and she caught her breath as she adjusted to ground being beneath her again.

They were now somewhere unfamiliar, yet reminiscent of the Firstborn temples she had seen before. A tall vaulted ceiling and a large open courtyard area. In the middle was a shallow pool

carved out of a dark black rock. Its bottom seemed to be lined with stone pebbles. The Prevailer gestured to the bath.

“The gentleman and lady shall cleanse themselves before meeting the Illustrious Benefactor and Protector. After the cleansing they will be clothed in more appropriate attire.”

The Prevailer moved to stand in a corner while he waited for them to cleanse. Ravenna was still adjusting to the unfamiliar room. She didn't need much more encouragement though. Shortly she had shed her clothes down to her bandeau. Some cultures, may have frowned upon such casual nakedness but the Fledgling Circle had always taken a more open view. Offering the clothes to a nearby attendant she made her way down into the bath. The water was pleasantly warm, tickling its way across her skin. She soaked in the warmth as she cleansed herself. Her brother followed suit as well settling down into the warm water and letting out a sigh of relief.

“It's been weeks since I've been properly clean. Eventually the stench just takes over everything.”

“I barely spent a day there and I was already begging for a bath. Could you help get my back?” She had been scrubbing at herself with the supplied sponge.

“Sure, if you get mine as well.” Soon Ravenna's skin felt soft and clean again. She stepped out of the bath, grabbing a nearby soft towel. She made her way over the Prevailer careful not to slip on the wet stones.

“This will do, step over here and raise your arms like this,” Ravenna made the motion, stretching her arms out wide.

The Prevailer snapped his fingers again. A soft silvery garment began to weave its way across her body, starting with her chest then down to her knees. Flowing loosely against her skin she couldn’t help but think how nice it was. Like being held by a cloud. Vincen received a similar silver garment, though it only covered his legs, baring his now shiny, unblemished chest.

“Definitely not your color,” she commented chuckling.

“I feel so exposed,” Vincen complained.

The Prevailer escorted them through another archway and then they were before the Benefactor herself.

“Bow before Her, Illustrious Protector and Benefactor of the Daeyric realm, seventh of the Council of Elders, forty-second in line to the Perch of Perfection”

Ravenna bowed deeply, her brother as well. This was both thrilling and nerve-wracking. She’d only seen the Benefactor twice previously, and never this close. The Firstborn was perched upon a golden rod, clutching it with thick talons. Her wings flared up, each wing nearly the span of a fully grown man. The white feathers, were tipped with gold. Sharp brown eyes stared down at them past a sharply formed beak. She released a high shrill shriek upon seeing them.

“The Illustrious Benefactor extends her greetings. She trusts you have good reason for involving your sister in such private affairs?”

“Benefactor, I am honored to have been called to your service. My sister is here by my request to serve as an aide as she is more versed in the courtly etiquette of the Firstborn.”

“Illustrious, Illustrious Benefactor,” Ravenna mouthed to him. He seemed to catch on.

“My Illustrious Benefactor, I meant no disrespect.”

The grim faced Prevailer translated the words to the Benefactor. Ravenna watched with anxious curiosity as the Firstborn responded. She could make out a few of the words from her studies. Requires, skies, pleased. Not enough to understand exactly what was being said though. She should have paid more attention to her tutors.

“Her Illustrious Benefactor takes no disrespect. She is pleased with your initiative. She requires your services, but perhaps your sister could be useful to her cause in other ways. Her Illustrious Benefactor has decided that you will be undertaking an expedition for the glory of the Firstborn. You will of course be well compensated for your part in these efforts.”

“I would be honored to undertake this expedition, if that is the wish of the Benefactor,” Vincen agreed although his worried glance at Ravenna suggested otherwise.

“Your agreement is most welcome, though you would submit yourself regardless, as it is the wish of the Firstborn. However, her illustrious Benefactor wishes for her specific instructions to be given to Master Cartier alone. I shall escort the lady from the room then return to facilitate discussion over the details of your agreement.”

Ravenna wished it was otherwise, but there was little she could do. It would do no good to try to force the Benefactor to do anything she didn't want to do. She was escorted by the dark robed Prevailer from the room. She followed him outside of the sanctum until she was back in the marble room with the bath. As she entered the room her clothes, now folded, and smelling of cinnamon were pressed into her arms.

"It is time for the lady to go home." The Prevailer gestured towards a Door that had not been in the room before. It glimmered as the silvery blue mist was licked at by the blue flames that framed the gateway between realms.

"I think I'd rather stay and wait for my brother," Ravenna insisted.

The Prevailer raised a thick eyebrow. Then silently he retrieved a small sapphire bead from a bag at his side. It glowed in the palm of his hand illuminating it a pale blue. He offered it to her.

"The key for your return journey to the Fledgling Circle," the Prevailer offered with a disconcerting smile, "We wouldn't want you getting lost on your way back."

"No thank you. I would prefer to wait on my brother," she tried to move away from the man. Instead she felt a strong arm grip her own. The man had latched onto her, his shimmering white patterns glowing fiercely.

"This is not up for negotiation. The Benefactor has asked for you to return to your Circle. It will be easier with your cooperation."

Ravenna sighed in acceptance. She was rather upset to be forced home in this manner. Though with her brother already locked in a meeting with the Benefactor there wasn't much she could do. He'll tell me anyways, as soon as he gets back, she thought as she took the key from the Prevailer and jabbed it into its proper place on her gauntlet. A moment later the familiar hum of the Song began to rise in tempo as the mist from her Songweaver met the frame of the Door. She flashed an annoyed glance back at the Prevailer before stepping through.

Back in Stonesbroke again, Ravenna sighed as she left the gate. She'd set the key in the indentation for the manor Doorhouse. She hadn't had much desire to traipse up the mountain from the temple embassy Door. It was currently summer in Stonesbroke which meant there would be hundreds of visitors coming through the main town. Ever since the Firstborn had built their observatory the idyllic mountain town had quickly grown into a popular tourist destination for scholars across the realms. She'd seen all sorts come through.

Ravenna made her way out of the Doorhouse, shutting off the collector. She'd have to send a letter for Myles before the night was over. He'd be starting to worry where she'd gotten off to when she didn't return to the seventh circle. No, she was back in the fourth circle, The Fledgling Circle. It was a warm sunny day and the mountain was in bloom. Perhaps she'd eat dinner tonight on the manor balcony, watch the sun set over the waterfall that fell on the far side of their property.

She was happily surprised as she noticed a trail of silvery blue mist darting her way across the lawn of the estate. Ravenna grasped the piece of paper as it floated into range of her hand. As she continued her way up into the estate she read the letter.

Ravenna,

It's good to hear from you. What kind of business has Vincen been getting into lately to attract the attention of the Benefactor? You'll have to let me know more after the meeting. Glad to hear all is going well at home. I've been busy exploring out in the field, navigator Henress says I should consider a career as a navigator. The idea of escorting tourists from circle to circle though doesn't appeal to me much. Though I am enjoying exploring the new world. It's amazing how different each realm is from each other. Did you know the Stardust Circle has two moons? I'd never seen the like before. It's incredible, wish you were here. I'm almost finished delivering cross circle orders with my father, expecting to make it home within the week. I'm excited to spend the Festival of Flowers with you.

E.

The letter brought a smile to Ravenna's face as she pocketed it. Even if she was nervous about what was going on between her brother and the Firstborn at least Emeyla was doing well. Hopefully once her brother returned her fears would be put to rest. It was definitely an honor to serve the Firstborn and the will of the Song. Hopefully they would be able to undertake whatever it was together.

Unfortunately, her nerves only amplified when her brother did not return later that night. Myles returned the next morning, back in his humanoid form. He told her Vincen had not yet returned to the work site. Another day passed as she grew steadily more nervous. Two more days passed before she learned anything more.

She was down at the theatre when she finally received some information. She felt a tickle on her arm. Myles the squirrel who had climbed up her shoulder. Annoyed Ravenna pushed him off.

“Get your own seat,” she grumbled at him.

“But you’re so much more comfortable than the stone,” Myles complained as he returned to his own seat.

Ravenna shrugged him off. She tried to focus on the play. She’d spent most of the day at the theater, trying to keep her focus off of her missing brother. At least she had prime seating, in the center of the theatre, the carved stone benches right above the stage. She knew most of the actors; they were from a local troupe. The theater was a more recent Firstborn addition; one Ravenna was happy to take advantage of. Ravenna was even more excited that ground had just been broken on the Firstborn astronomy academy. Although it meant a tax hike, it would mean a new library of information for her to enjoy.

Ravenna heard a low pitched hum near her ear and thought it was Myles bothering her again. She went to wave it away but found a letter instead. Intrigued she grabbed it out of the air. Instead of Emeyla’s familiar scrawl she saw the swirling curves of Vincen’s over exaggerated penmanship. Song be praised, she thought.

Sorry to keep you waiting but I’ve been very busy here with the Illustrious Benefactor (all titles, etc., you know them already). Further apologies that you were ejected from our proceedings so abruptly. Information is strictly on a need-to-know basis. I’ll tell you more when I return, but let

me say, this is important. Like change the circles as we know it important. I'm sending a request for father to come home; that way I can tell the both of you together. Could you have the servants prepare for his return? I'm sorry it looks like I won't be around the celebrate the Festival of Flowers. We'll meet shortly afterwards though. I wish it could be sooner, but the Firstborn are insistent I stay here a few more days while we agree on a list of approved expedition members and work out further details. I'll do my best to convince them to put you on that list.

Vincen

Adrenaline rushed through Ravenna's veins. She could barely keep in her seat. Prodding Myles, she motioned for him to follow her out of the horseshoe shaped theatre. He quickly shapeshifted back into his humanoid form, grabbing the thick blanket she had been sitting upon. She got a few dirty looks from other members of the audience as she dashed past. Once they cleared the edge of the theatre Ravenna explained the letter to Myles.

"He's calling Master Conte back? This must be incredibly serious," Myles replied with a tone of surprise.

"I haven't seen father in nearly a year. He's been spending so much time in the Cerulean Circle of late." Ravenna thought aloud. She'd never been particularly close to her father. A grumpy man who still held to an old religion that disapproved of some of her tastes.

"Well do you blame him? Center of the finest wine and women in nine circles. If I wasn't stuck with you I'd go join him," Myles stated with a tinge of playful jealousy in his voice.

“I wish he’d spend more time on those. If I get one more letter about gold reserve negotiations it will be too soon.”

Before Ravenna had the opportunity to think more about her father though, she’d at least have the Festival of Flowers to enjoy first. She was very excited to see Emeyla again. Now that she had some bearings on when she’d meet up with Vincen again she could focus her energy towards Emeyla’s return. It would be good to spend some time with her before finding out Vincen’s big news.

The rest of the week flew by quickly. Before she knew it the town of Stonesbroke had been decorated all over with shimmering banners announcing the upcoming festival. Shopkeepers displayed colorful wreaths of flowers all around their storefronts. Even the scholars from the Observatory were giddy with excitement wearing garlands of red flowers around their necks.

Ravenna had spent most of the morning getting ready for the first day of festivities. Emeyla would be coming in that afternoon, and she wanted everything to be perfect. After checking in with the servants she headed towards the Firstborn Temple Embassy where Emeyla would be arriving.

The climb to the Temple Embassy would take a portion of the day. As per tradition it was built at the highest point of Stonesbroke, which put it just outside the city carved out of the mountainside itself. As she grew closer she could already hear the unearthly sound of the Song permeating the air around her.

It had taken a crew of nearly a hundred stone-shapers to carve out the temple. Twenty-four carefully carved black granite statues lined the path into the temple, each representing the races, the children of the Song. She had no time to admire them though, instead Ravenna rushed past the statues, pushed past the people traversing the Avenue. It was extraordinarily busy today, must be travelers coming in for the festival.

Ravenna eventually walked the left most path inside the mountain. She was heading to the vyllachi, the embassy, instead of the temple main. The embassy consisted of a long line of Doorhouses. Before the Doorhouses there were just as many desks where blue robed regulators were furiously marking in ledgers and directing new arrivals/departures. Ravenna anxiously made her way towards one of the unoccupied acolytes. He sat in a long blue robe frantically directing travelers from place to place.

“Return from the Stardust Circle?”

“Doorhouse twelve today,” the acolyte muttered pointing towards an archway near the end of the embassy.

There were only twelve Doorhouses in their embassy, stone archways where Doors could be easily plotted in advance. Currently all of them were in use, people of all shapes and sizes emerging from misty blue clouds of Song. The layers of Song sounding against each other created a strange harmony. Ravenna eagerly waved as she saw Emeyla’s sister Deanne and her mother hanging around the twelfth Doorhouse as well.

“Hello Ravenna!” Deanne waved back as she got closer.

“Are you as excited to see Emeyla as I am?” Ravenna yelled. It was so loud in the embassy she had to shout just to be heard.

“Of course, and to see father too,” Deanne went on, “Oh look, here they come.”

Out of a silvery blue mist of Song stepped three familiar figures. Simun, Emeyla’s grinning father, Navigator Henress and then finally Emeyla. Ravenna rushed through nearly tackling her into a hug.

Emeyla laughed in satisfied surprise, then returned the favor with a passionate kiss. It was so good to see her again. What seemed an eternity later Ravenna slackened her grip, what felt like an eternity later as her and Emeyla came up for air.

“I missed you too,” Emeyla grinned.

“I’m so glad you made it back in town for the festival,” Ravenna returned the smile, “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Yes, well, how could I stay away with all those tantalizing letters you keep sending my way? I was only gone a month.”

“Only,” Ravenna punched her playfully, “that’s the longest trip you’ve taken in ages.”

“Girls, I know you’ve missed each other, but how about you let a mother hug her own daughter?” That came from Emeyla’s mother.

Ravenna reluctantly untangled herself from her lover letting Emeyla and the rest of her family reunite. There was something heartwarming about a family coming back together. She offered to carry some of Emeyla's bags once they cleared import registration. They split ways for a short while as Emeyla wanted to spend some time with her family, though promised to meet back up again that evening for the Festival.

The annual Festival of Flowers, timed with the blooming of the mountain golden roses. When they bloomed under the sunlight it looked as if half the mountainside was bathed in gold. Everyone always enjoyed the sight, and evening gatherings had grown into a full blown celebration over the ages.

Ravenna wandered around the festival grounds while she waited for Emeyla. Many traveling merchants had already set up their wares. Some stalls were full of delicious smells, begging the passersby to sample their treats. Others were gilded with flower wreaths, brilliantly dyed clothes, even flower themed jewelry. Ravenna had agreed to meet with Emeyla near the edge of the valley meadow; they always brought their own picnic and made the evening out of it.

Ravenna waved as Emeyla made her way across the brightly colored meadow towards her. She looked absolutely stunning under the shine of the setting sun. Ravenna admired her swornmate from head to toe as she approached. The long leather boots rising up over recently changed pants, a rum brown waist coat downplaying the feminine curves she knew were hidden underneath. Emeyla liked to keep her hair short, barely past her ears. Emeyla grabbed her hand as she got closer giving a warm smile.

“Someone got dressed up for the occasion,” Emeyla interjected, “Meeting someone special?”

“I was,” Ravenna replied, “but I guess you’ll have to do.”

Emeyla rolled her eyes then looked around, “No Myles tonight? What’s he up to?”

“He’s spending the night back in the Cerulean Circle with his family. Speaking of the Cerulean Circle,” She waved the bottle of ice wine she’d managed to procure from the estate cellars.

“Fantastic,” Emeyla laughed holding up her own, “I went through a lot of effort to get this for you.”

“Well, that just means we can each have our own bottle right?” Ravenna grinned mischievously.

It took a little while for them to find the perfect picnic spot among the meadow. Eventually they decided on a bed of grass right next to the river so they could hear its gurgling in the background. Emeyla spread out the blanket while Ravenna double-checked her picnic basket. All around them other families had the same idea, spreading out blankets, playing games as children run past. One kid dashed by jumping into the river causing droplets to come up and splash upon their backs.

“Remind me, we’re never having kids.” Emeyla towed herself off.

“You mean you don’t want little Ravenna’s running around our house one day?” Ravenna asked between bites of her meal.

“When you put it that way,” Emeyla grinned cuddling up to Ravenna upon the blanket. Ravenna lounged next to her enjoying her embrace.

They sat and looked upon the mountainside as they rested in each other’s arms. The golden roses were particularly beautiful this season. The cascade of shimmering gold seemed to run down the mountain like brilliant veins. Above them was the orange glow of the sun dipping beneath the tips of the mountains. Ravenna sighed and rested an arm around Emeyla as well. It was breathtaking, a good moment to spend with her closest friend. She tried to close her eyes, an attempt to keep the moment in her memory forever.

Emeyla interrupted the moment of peace. “So what’s this about your brother?”

“The strangest thing, he got called to work with the Benefactor herself. Something about being hired to lead an expedition. All hushed though, don’t know where or when.” Ravenna whispered.

“Intriguing, are you going to be a part of it?”

“If I or Vincen have anything to say about it,”

“I guess if you go then it’ll be my turn to stay back here and pine for you,”

“Oh you’ll survive,” Ravenna replied chuckling, “Now shut up for a bit, I want to enjoy this moment.”

Emeyla gave a goofy grin which turned into a peck upon her cheek. Soft, warm and caring.

Ravenna pulled closer to return the favor. Her heart fluttered, warmth spreading through her

head to her toes. Her lips met Emeyla's own. As they continued to kiss Ravenna tumbled around with Emelya across the blanket and onto the grass. Their bodies intertwined, soaked in happiness and the last rays of a dying day.

CHAPTER 3

COLLECTORS, KEYS AND OTHER THINGS

Emeyla:

She had awoken perfectly contented. A smiling face with brilliant blue eyes stared down at her. Ravenna stood over her waving a basket of muffins underneath her nose. Mhmm, the delicious smell filled her nostrils. She leaned up from her place on the ground. "Alright Ravenna, I'm up, I'm up," she grumbled.

Ravenna had danced around the room, her wiry frame bouncing up and down. She was happy, we were happy. Sunlight poured in through the large shop window. The door had been unlocked by Ravenna to interrupt Emeyla's slumber.

"Fresh from the manor's kitchen! I thought you might like a treat while I shared the exciting news," Ravenna practically squeaked.

"You came all the way down from the manor at this hour? It's barely even sunrise." She couldn't help but smile though, Emeyla was still recalling the wonderful memories of the night before. The Festival of Flowers had been particularly enjoyable this year. Though she still had a slight hangover from the copious amounts of ice wine she had consumed.

"I just couldn't wait to share the news! When I met up with Vincen late last night he explained the whole situation. The Firstborn want us to take part in some of the preliminary expeditions to a newly discovered Circle. Can you imagine? A new Circle in our lifetime? They'll have to change

the celestial skeletons and everything. We're not supposed to tell anyone-but you know I had to share!"

"That's a lot to take in this early in the morning. You'll have to tell me again after breakfast, maybe again after that as well," she muttered through a stifled yawn.

"Why do you think I brought the muffins?" Ravenna chuckled.

"You know me," Emeyla cracked a warm smile as she grabbed a muffin and bit into it. She savored the sweet taste of the fruity and crisp delight.

That was the last memory Emeyla could truly look back on fondly. It seemed like things had steadily gone downhill from there. Emeyla tried to focus, pull herself out of the happy memories and back to the present.

Emeyla could feel the damp bench underneath her weight. It seemed everything here was always wet though. Even now the rain dripped softly from the endless forest of leaves that seemed to replace the sky in this circle. Emeyla was sitting underneath the overhang of the only tavern in the strange city, a somewhat drier spot, enjoying a midday meal before setting off to her next destination. The Weeping Circle was definitely one of the most beautiful realms she had visited this trip. The city of Xaa'k was eerily beautiful as the pale rays of sun gleamed through the dense foliage of strange leaves above them. She hadn't seen sky in the full week she had spent traveling across the strange mix of jungle and city. There had to be one up there somewhere though because the rain kept coming.

In another life the quiet patter of the rain, the strange city, might have been romantic. In this one though she only found it another disappointing delivery. Emeyla took another sip from the small wooden cup of cool milk. Her other hand was occupied with the beginnings of a piece of rainbow colored fish and fruit wrapped in a soft doughy shell. Calai the locals called it and it was soon becoming her favorite food. When she had the time she'd have to learn the recipe. Her travelling companion, was currently nestled underneath the overhang of the inn having grown tired of dashing through the rain.

Emeyla took a bit of her sandwich and dangled it over Sino's direction. The dog happily barked, rushing to her side. Emeyla was glad they were somewhere cooler. Sino was a hound of her homeland, large and handsome with thick dark red stripes across wooly white fur. Well suited for the mountainsides of home, not so much many other places. She rubbed his rain soaked head before slipping her hand down to grab the pack at his side. Emeyla pulled out two things, a small notebook and a vylchiff raksyr, celestial skeleton.

Finding the driest space on the table she opened the notebook. Upon it was a dwindling list of crossed off deliveries.

1 songweaver, Amarian model, Metal: Silver, custom order, delivery Cerulean Circle to Maun Stonebreaker

4 collectors, Tett 4th Gen travel-sized, Metal: Brass base, delivery to Circle of Mists to Enixophos Company, Castrafar outpost.

The list continued down to the bottom ending with the only one she had left.

2 gold conducting rods, replacement parts for collector, older model (Maras 2rd generation), delivery to Weeping Circle, Xaa'k city, you know where to go by now.

Emeyla did know where to go, sometimes she thought Daario let his collector break on purpose so he could get a visit. She'd kept him waiting long enough. Her visa would expire soon, and all her deliveries needed to be done by then. As much as she wanted to continue searching for leads, anyone who might be able to add credence to her suspicion that her father and Ravenna were indeed still alive.

Emeyla shut the notebook and instead turned to the celestial skeleton she had pulled out. A simple instrument consisting of nine brass rings that could be rotated to calculate the best places to move from circle to circle with ease. In the center was the large brass globe symbolizing the Golden Circle, the arrogantly listed first circle, Firstborn's native home. By this point it was becoming one of the few Circles she had never visited. Emeyla knew though that this celestial skeleton was actually inaccurate to the reality. A tenth circle had been discovered a year ago, but the Firstborn had done their best to erase all memories of its existence.

Not that it was entirely without cause. She knew why a tenth ring had not been added, it was because of the tragedy that had occurred in the place the folks from Stonesbroke called the Forgotten Circle. Primarily because everyone tried to forget of its existence. Nearly a year ago to the day the Firstborn had recruited the eldest son of their prominent merchant family, Vincen Cartier to lead an expedition to the Forgotten Circle. At the time it had been exciting, a tenth potential realm to travel to, new exotic goods, perhaps peoples and technology the Nest could benefit from. Master Cartier had handpicked many of the expedition members from the

town, including her father and her swornmate, Ravenna. Now it seemed all Vincen Cartier and the Firstborn wanted to do was forget about it.

Emeyla couldn't forget though. If it wasn't for the expedition she wouldn't be running deliveries by herself. Navigator Henress, had never returned from the expedition. Since there was no Henress, no tag-along tourists... no Father either. She didn't even have Ravenna to send letters back to while she was on the road. She remembered how happy Ravenna had seemed when she had first shared the news. It already seemed like a distant memory.

Emeyla packed up the notebook and celestial skeleton back in Sino's pack. She couldn't search any longer, she'd delayed long enough while she searched through her travels. Emeyla couldn't put to rest her sneaking suspicions. There had been no bodies. This coupled with a town-wide expedition hushed up? Not even any second attempts? Emeyla felt they had not been told the whole truth. If it was important enough for the Benefactor to get personally involved, the Firstborn wouldn't let it go so easily.

If she was correct, then her father and Ravenna could still be alive. Just trapped somewhere, unable to get back. Ever since she had come to this conclusion, everywhere she went Emeyla spent time checking, had anyone heard anything? Did anyone else know of the Forgotten Circle? Had any strangers come through unexpected Doors? Nothing though. Once Vincen Cartier had found out she'd been searching he had put a serious amount of effort into dissuading her attempts. In fact, it seemed like he had a vested interest in her not finding out the truth, she thought as she made her way over to Daario's bakery.

Emeyla was still getting used to navigating the wooden bridges between buildings by herself. She took a right, then a left trying to remember the way down the winding paths to get there. She'd hoped it wouldn't take too long, the rain was starting to change to a stronger pounding rhythm. Eventually she managed to navigate to the right place. An elevated wooden hut, not unlike the others, hovering on stilts above the river that ran underneath the town. Before she could reach the door though Daario opened it up.

"Come in, come out of the rain," he trumpeted in his thick Xaa'keen accent.

Emeyla happily obliged, Sino quickly following. Soon she was in the comfort of a much drier house. Flour coated the nearby tables, along with rows of decorated pastries frosted with delectable looking colors. Daario looked similarly decorated in a wide array of different frostings himself. Most of the colors clashed terribly with his vivid yellowy green scales. Sino bounced enthusiastically around him attempting to lick some of the frosting off with his tongue.

"Thanks Daario, I appreciate it," she replied graciously.

Daario looked her up and down, "Where have you been? I expected you two weeks ago,"

"Apologies, I've had a lot of deliveries this month," that was true. It was also true she'd deliberately spent nearly two of those weeks ignoring her deliveries, and instead searching the Circles for any whispers or clues about the Forgotten Circle.

“Apologies don’t satisfy my customers, saraahiaa!” Daario hissed flicking his forked tongue towards her.

Emeyla called Sino over. The red-white blur dashed over to her wagging his tail. Emeyla reached into his bag and pulled out both the required parts and the record book.

“Two gold conducting rods, for a Maras 2nd generation industrial collector model. You should really consider updating to a newer model. I’ve got a hand-held Tett 4th gen for my songweaver. Hasn’t broken in over a dozen deliveries.”

“My Maras model has served me well for forty years. If I changed to another to power my shop my customers would riot. It’s part of the authentic Daario experience. There’s value in old things, I see you’re still using your father’s old songweaver. He always performed fine workmanship, how is your family holding up? I was grieved to hear of his passing.”

“We’re hanging in there. It’s been a tough year for the family. Would you like me to install these, or are you going to hire a specialist from in Circle?” Emeyla asked looking around the room for the collector.

Daario gestured towards the collector in the corner of the room. The Maras editions were particularly beautiful, a long brass tube winding like a curved mountain ram’s horn. The sides were etched with the faded markings of leaves. Around the tip of the horn was a glass dome, appearing like a bubble, where a few droplets of misty silver blue Song seemed to still be contained. Emeyla following her sister’s written instructions removed a panel near the base of the collector. Carefully she looked for the place to position the golden rods.

"You should answer your mother's letters. She's worried about you." Daario hissed from above her.

"What, I didn-" Emeyla sputtered.

"I sent her a letter when you didn't arrive on time with my order. Her Songpost said she hadn't heard from you in near a month. Where have you been spending all this time? Family should grow closer, not farther from loss."

"Daario," Emeyla grunted as she removed the old conductors, "it's frankly none of your business."

"When your business affects my work, it becomes my business. But for better reasons, I knew your father well. I know how his death must be grieving you."

"My father-erhm-is not dead. He's missing. There's a difference."

"Emeyla,"

But before Daario could continue Emeyla finished up installing the conductors. She backed away from the piece feeling rather defensive. Daario was hovering around the counter, his reptilian claws clutching an unfamiliar instrument to knead some dough. Emeyla wiped her hands on a towel nearby, then returned to the record book.

"Two golden conductors, is twelve killi, seven nia base charge. Four nia, for cross-circle importation tax, two killi for gold goods tax and seven rin for installation charge. So fifteen killi, two nia, and seven rin total."

Emeyla waited while Daario counted out the money. This was how the Firstborn really maintained their power. It seemed like anything that could be invented, the Firstborn would create a tax for. Their standardized system of banking made it much easier to trade across the circles, but it would have been easier if they didn't tax everything relentlessly. At least it was simple enough to remember, nine rin to a nia, nine nia to a killi. She knew the formula by heart, like anyone else who did inter-realm exchange.

Daario held on to the coins instead of handing them over to her as she expected. Instead he kept them in his scaled palm as his yellow eyes leered over her.

"First tell me what took so long. Then you can get your payment."

"Now that's not fair," Emeyla complained leaning up against the counter.

"Fair would be letting your mother know what you've been up to. What are you doing with all this time?"

"Fine," Emeyla snapped back, lips pursed.

"I was late because I was busy trying to find out if there were any new leads to the Forgotten Circle & Firstborn plans. I don't buy their official story. It seems too unlike them."

Daario's yellow eyes flickered for a moment. He shifted his weight from one claw to another. Did he know something? That would be her luck. Daario grimaced and apparently decided to share his knowledge.

"I did hear something strange the other day...if you promise to return to your mother *immediately* I could share the information."

"Daario, of course, song sworn,"

Daario shifted around wiping his hands off on a nearby towel. Then he removed a well-worn ledger from his counter. He pushed it her way, a green claw pointing at a name.

"Had a strange fellow come in here last week all sorts of strange. Seemed off his rocker, didn't right know where he was. Seemed all muddled talking of clouds and blood. Claimed he was not from around here, and didn't seem to know when I was asking him which Circle he was trying to get back to. Said he needed to get back somewhere so I sent him over to Sylv's. Maybe, you can ask her next time you're in the Circle."

"Thanks Daario, that's the best lead I've had in months."

"Mind you visit your mother again first, here's your payment," Daario slid a pile of brass and silver coins her way.

Emeyla carefully double checked the money before she pocketed it into a small pouch which she placed in her own pack. She looked back at Daario again then to the door. Her heart was racing, adrenaline pumping through her veins. Some stranger claiming to be from a strange new circle? Maybe he was a survivor, mind muddled, trying to get home. Or he could have just been dead drunk. Think optimistically, Emeyla.

“Well, I guess I should get going. Deanne will want the money, and like you were saying, I need to get back to my mother,” she said in a rush grabbing the coins.

“Take a cookie with you and seriously, if you ever need to talk, come visit.” Daario insisted.

Elated, Emeyla happily took a frosted cookie, one that looked a bit like a tree, and made her way out of the hut.

She walked towards the Firstborn temple embassy. It’d be easiest to just use the temple Doorhouses to travel back home. As Emeyla approached the temple embassy she checked her bag to make sure everything was in order. She frowned as she counted out the travelling keys left in her bag. There should have been two keys to home, but she could only find one.

Emeyla tried shaking the bag to make sure nothing was caught in its folds. Nothing. Well, Emeyla had just been paid. So it was a good opportunity to stock up. After all, this was even better, Emeyla had an actual excuse to stop by Sylv’s before she left. Instead of taking the left path upwards towards the temple, Emeyla instead pivoted her feet down a wooden bridge towards the market place.

Emeyla didn’t know Sylv very well, as key sellers tended to run with specific engravers. Her father had known her quite well. Sylv had bothered her father for years about letting her supply him. Even his disappearance hadn’t stopped Sylv from constantly sending letters suggesting they change suppliers. Prepared for a pitch, it didn’t stop Emeyla from making her way towards the woman’s stall. She might actually be able to use that desire today.

Sylv's stall was spectacular. Keys always glittered reminiscent of gems. They were arranged in buckets underneath her tent as easily as if they were fruits on display. From glittering brilliant red beads for the Adamant Circle to glowing green globes for the Rotting Circle they formed an iridescent sheen around the tent. The old woman would be around the tent somewhere, ready to pounce.

She heard the gravelly voice as she approached the stall, "Emeyla my dear! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I just need a key to get home."

Emeyla made her way to the bucket full of shimmering sapphire keys. She took the nearby metal scoop and scooped a few into a nearby pouch. They jingled as they hit the bottom of the pouch. Sylv slithered over from another customer to make her pitch to Emeyla.

"Of course, no better keys than a Sylv key. I was sorry to hear of your father's passing. Perhaps in his absence, you might be needing some new suppliers? I would be willing to offer my services of course--"

Emeyla gritted her teeth carefully balancing her words, "Well Deanne and mother still really control our store's supply lines..."

"Oh," Sylv's lips pursed.

"But," Emeyla continued, "Maybe I could do some convincing, if you helped me with a favor."

The old woman's eyes glittered as fiercely as her keys. Emeyla had said the right thing, baited her attention. Now she simply had to reel her in.

"I was talking with Daario, he said he sent some disoriented traveler your way talking about clouds and blood? Do you remember him? Perhaps where he went?"

Sylv raised a curious eyebrow. Emeyla tapped a foot impatiently as she waited. The rain was still coming down and this was less protected than Daario's shop. The rain was starting to soak into her coat and give her a chill. Sylv replied in her crackling voice,

"Oh of course, handsome fellow. Said he needed to get back to the Tower. Rambled about the Sky City I think? I supposed he meant the Circle of Isles and sent him that direction. Eighth indentation if I remember right? Now about that convincing--"

"-Of course Sylv," Emeyla insisted with a smile, "I'll make sure to put in a good word. I've got to get home soon. So if we could just-," Emeyla waved the freshly poured bag of Fledgling keys in Sylv's face.

She counted out the coins, three rin for a half a bag. Then two more for taxes of course. They were about to finalize the exchange as Emeyla noticed the shimmering yellow bucket labelled as Circle of Isles keys. If the man was trying to get back there, maybe if she moved quickly she could track him down there. She pulled out another rin.

"Could you toss a few Circle of Isles keys in there too?"

“Of course,” Sylv replied, “and of course as a potential supplier I would offer you discount prices.”

“Yeah,” Emeyla said haphazardly. She took the bag of keys back. Now it was time to get to the Temple Embassy to head home. They were always the most reliable method of travel. Before she ran across the city Emeyla double-checked to make sure she had everything this time. Her coin purse, Sino by her side, soaked backpack firmly set on her back. Emeyla was just about to cross over towards the temple summit before she noticed the shimmering date on her travel visa, the thirteenth of Fyraas. Silence! She’d overstayed her visa. Emeyla groaned. She must have just overstayed the date with her diversion to the market place. That was not good, it’d mean a bunch of paperwork and a hefty fine if she went through an officially sanctioned Firstborn Door.

I guess I’ll be making my own then, Emeyla thought to herself. She checked the gauge on her Songweaver. That’d be more than enough to travel home. She wouldn’t want to be making one in the middle of the city though. She’d have to make it outside of the city first.

It was a short walk from Sylv’s to the edge of the city. Carefully she tried to keep an eye around her for any Firstborn regulators. As she left the city into the unfamiliar glimmering forest she found herself looking around back and forth. Eventually she found what seemed a quiet and unpopulated spot several dozen wingspans away from the city. The rain was really starting to pour down.

“Alright, finally time to head home,” Emeyla growled as she pulled her Songweaver unceremoniously from her pack. She checked her Songweaver’s storage as she pulled it from her knapsack. Two of the three engraved marking lines were sparkling with the Song. The long brass glove’s storage seemed to have enough Song stored to conjure a Door. She placed it upon her hand preparing to summon a Door.

She flipped the switch on her songweaver and the familiar misty Song began to dance around her gloved hand. From her newly purchased bag of keys, she pulled out a few blue beads, and a yellow bead. They all looked the same inside there. The yellow bead was so tempting in her hand. Since her visa had already expired, she’d probably have travelling rights revoked for some time if the Firstborn found out. This would most likely be her best chance to get some answers. Then again, she’d promised Daario...

Mother can wait, Emeyla pushed the shimmering yellow crystal into one of the eighth circle indentations upon the forearm of her own Songweaver with her left hand. If there was a chance she could find Ravenna and her father it was worth taking. She’d never been to the Circle of Isles before, but hopefully she’d be able to find some directions once she got there. Still she didn’t want them to worry too much. She could send Sino home, maybe with a short message. Emeyla took a moment to pen a short letter, putting it inside to the dog’s pouch. Then she twisted a key into place on Sino’s harness. Hopefully that should bring him straight back through a Door near Deanne’s workshop.

After doing that, Emeyla turned her focus back to her own progress. The misty blue Song started to hiss around her wrist. The Song slowly condensed and spread out to envelope her glove in a glittering sapphire cloud. She pointed at an opening between two nearby trees.

“Open a door,” she whispered but nothing happened. Maybe she wasn’t concentrating hard enough. Once again Emeyla thrust her arm out as she imagined the door within her mind.

“By the silence, open!” A brilliant note of music filled her ears as the glove shot a brilliant blast of blue mist into the ground nearby. The ground looked scorched for a brief moment. Finally, as she gestured wildly a pale blue door began to crackle into existence. Sino hurriedly ran inside as he was prone to do. He would be fine, she needed to find out the truth.

Emeyla sputtered as water filled her lungs. She opened her eyes only to feel the sting of salt. She was floating. Flailing she tried to push her way up to the surface. Upon breaking into fresh air she gasped out of breath and in shock. Emeyla struggled to keep up above the water. The river back home was not half as deep as this endless ocean. She also couldn’t see the bottom of the river back home it was too dirty, unlike this water, she could see all the way down to the sunlit sand below them.

So this is what the Circle of Isles looks like. It’s so, foreign. There were fish and weird shelled creatures beneath her. Reddish pink hills of a substance she couldn’t tell if it was stone or something else stretched beneath her. Focus Emeyla, we’re not here to sight see, we’re trying to find someone. She could see a shoreline developing and made her way towards the sand as

her muscles ached with exhaustion. Emeyla fell upon the sand not wanting to move any further.

“Emeyla, get up, we can’t rest here.” Emeyla encouraged herself.

Emeyla had recognized the imprint of some nest embedded deep into the sand of the shoreline, with a few eggs inside. Emeyla dragged herself to her feet. She didn’t want to test her luck in running across some savage predator. She reached back into her now thoroughly soaked backpack her hand gripping the hilt of her climbing axe. Emeyla was lucky she’d had that delivery in the Circle of Mists. If not, she’d have left the axe at home.

She heard a roar as an unfamiliar beast leered at her from just a little bit away. An ugly thing with a long rounded snout and thick bony plates across its body. The beast clapped its jaws shut making an intimidating snap that shook every bone in her body. It began scuttling across the sand towards her as Emeyla pulled the axe from her backpack. She highly doubted the axe would pierce its thick looking hide. Her songweaver was reading empty from her wrist.

“Silence!”, Emeyla cursed as she started running across the sand.

Her feet sank unevenly. Her soaked backpack and clothes were slowing her down. She tripped falling face forward into the sand. Emeyla struggled to get back up as the beast was nearly upon her. Emeyla took her best chance and stabbed her axe with all her might at its head. The beast howled missing its bite. Instead the sharp teeth only grazed Emeyla’s leg. As Emeyla recovered she released the handle of the axe-still firmly lodged in the beast’s greenish snout.

Emeyla tossed the only useful thing she had left from her pack, a net at the beast as she scrambled away. The beast roared and viciously ripped apart the net. Blood and sweat fell upon her as the beast was about to snap its jaws upon her neck. Her heart raced.

Emeyla lunged to the side running at the armored beast. She grabbed the beasts tail a few tugs, then heaving it backwards with all her might, she flung the tail down and leaped onto the beast's neck, landing with her knees on the ground on either side of the beast's back. It felt odd and scaly between her legs. With her hands on the back of the beast's neck, the beast couldn't turn its head sideways to bite, but it countered by thrashing from side to side, whipping its tail and clawing at her feet. Undaunted, Emeyla gripped the climbing axe pushing it further into the beast's skull. She groaned from the effort. The beast quivered. It snapped its teeth. Its claws wriggled in the sand. Eventually it stopped moving, clearly dead.

Groaning and covered in sand she dusted herself off and looked around. There didn't seem to be any more nearby. Or if there were they had been scared off. After making sure the area was secure Emeyla returned to the animal. It would be a waste to not at least attempt to see what she could salvage from the beast.

Emeyla rifled through her backpack. She didn't have the proper tools or training to properly skin and butcher the beast. Taking her axe to its hide, she could at least get to the meat inside. The realm's sun was setting low by the time she finished carving the beast up. There seemed to be a lot of good meat, she'd wrapped up as much as she could carry in the nearby large leaves. The rest would have to be left, there was only so much she could carry. Emeyla had also

managed to salvage some of the hide as well. It was a shame it was so heavy, if she had a better way to carry it she could have kept some to fashion into a bag at a later date.

She wasn't going very far tonight. Better to start a fire and set up a camp for the evening.

Emeyla walked across the sandy shore looking for drywood. She was on a small island, so different than home, just a patch of land on what looked like an endless sea. The sky showed strange constellations, one she hadn't seen before.

"Alright, here's what I found." She said to herself, as she dumped the small collection of dry wood into the sand. Emeyla had learned a thing or two from Navigator Henress & her father in their travels. She lashed the climbing ropes from her bag across a couple of trees to dry her soaked clothing. A few matches later and a small crackling fire was rising from the beach. That'd hopefully help keep away predators as well. She took some of the meat that she had previously cut up and started to roast it over the fire. The smell was comforting along with the warmth from the fire upon her cold toes.

Emeyla took a swig from her canteen. She'd have to remember to find some fresh water before too long. Emeyla took a look at the tuning key upon her songweaver. The yellow orb still gleamed faintly.

“Let’s hope this isn’t a wild gremleck chase,” she chuckled nervously.

The details on her father’s gauntlet were a bit faded so she couldn’t navigate her exact position. Emeyla had her own gauntlet, but ever since her father had been pronounced dead Emeyla had chosen to wear his songweaver for delivery runs. It helped her feel like he was still along, helping her in what way he still could. She didn’t know exactly where she was. Best idea would probably be to push forward until she could find someone. Emeyla knew there were inhabitants somewhere here, her father had made some runs to the Circle of Isles when she was younger. Where they were in relation to her though she had no idea.

The warm wind seeped into her skin as she sat upon the sand. As things dried she removed a well-worn portable collector. The hand-held collector was much newer than her gauntlet, a recent Tett innovation. It resembled an hourglass, two glass domes, swirling into each other, held in place by a simple brass frame. Not fancy, but much more practical for her frequent journeys than carrying around a full sized collector. She took half a peep at the collector. It was glowing a bit from having travelled through the door. The silvery blue vapor it had collected throughout the day danced around inside its glass domes. Emeyla removed her gauntlet She switched the lever on the collector, so the Song could fill at least some of the reservoir of her songweaver overnight.

Content with her work for the evening, Emeyla pulled a small letter from her pants pocket. She gazed down at it longingly. It was illuminated faintly by the faint orange glow of the fire beneath her feet. The weathered letter was fading; particularly after her dip it was more a keepsake than readable by this point. Still she stared at it longingly.

"I will find you," she declared determinedly.

Emeyla spent a few moments enjoying the beautiful night sky as she munched upon a handful of her meat. It was a shame she couldn't carry more with her. The firm meat had a flavor like fish that paired well with the crystalline sky. The setting suns lit the rings aflame like they were a wall of shimmering diamonds. It was so unlike the boring sunsets of home, a single sun in a boring blue sky. Emeyla wondered how long it had been since she had last enjoyed a sunset. It felt too long. Emeyla tried to calm herself down to sleep. There would be time to track down this strange man in the morning.

Morning on the beach was stunning, the silver sand of the beach with bright sapphire waves gently lapping at the shore was a pleasant sight. The way the bright ginger suns emerged from the water also struck a vivid image. The green fronds above her gave some shade. It was time to continue her search.

Emeyla stretched her legs out beneath her. After a good stretch she looked at the trees above her. It'd be relatively easy to climb one and get a better lay of the land. With a smile on her face Emeyla put her hands upon the tree and started her climb. The fronds didn't make the best climbing material but it was a sturdy trunk. She could shimmy up it well enough. Reaching the top of the tree she looked around.

The sunshine illuminated everything. The beautiful greens of the trees, Emeyla could see brown pelted animals scurrying through the trees. As she looked up and around she could see whole of the island. There was sand and trees...and from her spot at the top of the tree she could

clearly make out tracks crossing the beach into the nearby forest. They seemed humanoid enough. She scurried down and after collecting her belongings headed towards the tracks.

“Maybe that’s who I’m looking for,” she muttered to herself hopefully.

The tracks led her into deep clusters of the strange thorny trees sprouting leaves that appeared almost like orange pelts. Her fascination got the better of her as she had to brush up against one of them. She was surprised to find it prickly with a sharp scent almost burning her nose. She kept an eye upon the tracks though.

As the day went on further, she got thirstier and thirstier. By the time she heard the gentle sound of a stream nearby. Emeyla picked up the pace following the noise, ignoring the tracks. In a few moments she fell upon a gurgling river.

She threw herself down beside the river. She took her canteen and thrust it into the water collecting what she could. Before she brought it up to her lips she added one of the purifying salts she still had in her pack. After what seemed one of the longest moments in her life she raised the canteen to her lips and drank.

As the refreshing water satisfied her she sat up and began to observe her surroundings further. It was as beautiful as the rest of the world. On the other side of the river the tracks picked up again. The river didn’t look too fast; she could probably swim across.

Emeyla loosened her pack and then plunged foot first into the river mouth. It was fairly warm but the wetness still lapped at her. The current was much stronger than she had expected. She

gritted her teeth and continued further trying to dig her boots into the sand for as long as possible. Then she took the leap.

She tried to use the current to her advantage letting it power her forward even as she headed downstream. She had to dive down and swim with her arms attempting to cross the river mouth. Her muscles ached and she came up for air. The water pounded against her. She struggled for breath and continued forward. The current was too strong; she had misjudged herself. She struggled to reach the surface as she was dragged underneath the strong rushing water.

Then from behind her she felt a strong arm grasp her. Strong legs kicked and pushed her forward. Her lungs were aching as her someone's arms pulled her out of the water and her lungs filled with breath. She helped push, kicking with her legs. After a few tense moments she was thrust, gasping and heaving onto the sand. A man looked over her with a mixture of surprise and apprehension.

"Thanks," Emeyla sputtered, "You probably saved my life,"

"Abyss take you," the man swore in a tongue with an unfamiliar accent, "what were you thinking?"

Emeyla paused to take a breath, "I guess I wasn't. I've just been trying to find someone. Ended up misjudging the current."

“Well, maybe we can both help each other out. I’ve been trying to find someone, something in this place. Bloody woman sent me here without so much as a second squint.”

“Bloody woman?” Emeyla inquired, “You wouldn’t happen to be talking about an old grumpy woman, manning a key stand? Wild gray hair? Sylv?”

“You know her? Well curse her for me,” the man grumbled, “who are you? Who were you looking for?”

“Oddly enough, might be you,” Emeyla began to explain cautiously. Before she could explain further though the man waved her in his direction.

“Really? I didn’t think the damn kings would send anyone,” he complained as he moved forward. He beckoned for her to follow. Emeyla started after him, interested to see what he had to say. Maybe if she was lucky she’d find out something useful.

CHAPTER 4

COLLECTING, RECOLLECTING

Deanne:

The whirring of the machines was familiar. The smell of burning oil filled the shop. The constant sparks the malfunctioning Collector was emitting was starting to become irritating. A Lyme model, they were known for being particularly finicky. This one had been acting this way for weeks, ever since the last snow storm. The cold didn't usually bother the machines, but this winter the mountain had been getting more snow than usual. That and the steel decorative accents tended to attract trouble. With a carefully gloved hand she once again pulled the lever near the base of the rod into the *keep* position. The gears came grinding to a halt spitting out a misbehaving gear. It danced off the table and into the junk pile Deanne had been collecting in the corner for months. Sometimes it seemed like everybody had their different type of collector they preferred. They all did the same job though, catching and storing Song.

"Well if it wasn't working anyways... Let's see if I have anything in my spare parts drawer." She mumbled to herself.

Deanne shifted around the crowded workshop with deft precision. Anyone else would have been absolutely lost in her crowd of half-finished projects, haphazardly placed shelves and overflowing buckets of the conductive metal but she knew it like the back of her hand. Most of

the projects came in from visitors to Stonesbroke. It was one of the more popular tourist destinations in the Fourth Circle, more commonly known as the Fledgling Circle. As an engraver though, it was easier to go by the numbers. Names could change depending on who said them, positions didn't.

It was however, interesting seeing how different types of physiologies formed their conductors. All one needed to catch the Syng was the right metal as a starting point, gold, silver or brass usually did the trick. It was the designs that differed in fascinating ways. Like, last week a few snake-like creatures, had left long brass tube-shaped songweavers for her to work on. It would be productive to break them apart and see exactly how they worked. Maybe she could expand the stock and break into a new market. Granted, that would require keeping up with the current market first. It had been an exhausting year trying to keep up with all the orders she had been covering. Having only one engraver instead of two tended to make the work slower. On top of that it was expected that she put forth superior quality work. That was the mark of true Ferra family craftsmanship.

Deanne reached into the third drawer down on the left of the bent metal shelf she pulled out a tray of assorted gears. She passed over the larger ones, grabbing one from a collection of small brass gears. After years of practice with the machines she knew which gears went where and the peculiar sounds each one made. Walking back over she carefully removed a few surrounding gears with her wrench before placing the new brass gear in between them. A few moments later the gears were all back in place and she optimistically screwed the plates back on the collector.

That should fix the problem. Well at least this problem, Deanne thought, I've still got plenty more. Deanne grabbed her brass gauntlet off of the table in front of her. It barely resembled a gauntlet by this point from all of the modifications she had added to it. A collection of carefully assembled tubing, gears and faucets jutted out upon the glove. Instead of the smooth look most went for, she had crafted hers over the years to give her the most precise mechanics and manipulations. Much more important than a pretty looking songweaver. She needed to replace her gatherer tube, it was starting to get a little worn. As she examined it she noticed the reservoir was near empty though, perfect for testing.

Most modern models could absorb straight from collector to songweaver by air. However, Deanne found it easiest to test by doing things the old manual way. She grinned as she screwed a coiled brass tube to one edge of the reservoir, the other attached to the collector. "Let's see if I can get any life into you," she grunted as she pulled the lever downwards and the collector began to spit Syng, the silvery blue mist singing its familiar notes. She could hear it bending high, diving low, cascading its sweet playful notes. Anyone untrained might call nonsense, or mere noise but the Song was more than its warm dulcet notes.

It was the energy of all the realms, perhaps it was the essence of life itself. Most often it took the form of a silvery blue mist when condensed, though it could take others. The Syng flowed across the room dancing up and down making soft clouds as it began to disperse. It looked like the storm clouds that sometimes crossed the sky. However, unlike the storm clouds these could be manipulated, made to work her will. The clouds started whirling around and condensing around her songweaver. Much to her relief the reservoir began to fill quickly with the pulsing

mist. So it was transferring again, but will it stop if shut off? She asked herself as she pulled down the lever. The whirring of the gears began to slow down. Deanne was just about to call it a success when it started spurting Syng again.

There was a moment of blinding light. Chilling cold filled Deanne starting with her face. She rubbed her eyes adjusting to the misty portal that had appeared. Her ears hurt from the unexpected wave of Syng. She clutched her the side of her head as she pushed closer towards the collector at the center of the maelstrom. As the storm continued to grow, the Syng clouds starting to lash out lightning Deanne hurriedly unscrewed her gauntlet, steadied herself, and aimed it at the portal.

“Stabilize,” she commanded focusing on restoring peace to her workshop. As the Syng bent to her will it began to become more bearable. Deanne could feel her fingers again. Out of all the days to be caught unprepared, she thought. She stumbled over to the northwest corner of the room. First she pulled down her goggles onto her face, the tinted lenses making the overwhelming silvery blue mist more bearable. Secondly she switched the lever on her own primary collector from *keep* to *receive*. Her reliable collector began to siphon up the misty Syng. This would be the last time she agreed to work with a Lyme model. Even though her father had taken all challengers she didn’t have to. Before she finished the thought though she already knew she wouldn’t stop, it just meant she had to get better at controlling these things.

The old collector began to siphon the energy to itself. Her father had made it ages back, an older Maras model he had helped pioneer. Only one glass container, it couldn’t hold half as much as some of the newer editions. She couldn’t bear to replace it though. It had the etchings

from her father all across the curved base, images of stags dancing through forests. The silver beast did its work well, siphoning the Syng into its pleasant prison. The storm began to grow smaller and Deanne gave a sigh of relief.

The Syng was easy enough once one knew how to use it. Most people would freak out in the sight of such a Songstorm but it was a hazard of the job when one worked with it all day. Happy to have the situation back in control, she pointed her gauntlet towards the offending machine.

“Disassemble,” she cried out as she imagined the offending parts in her mind. The Song formed into silvery blue ropes, latching upon both her glove then upon the malfunctioning collector. Quickly they began taking apart the machine as she instructed. She didn’t necessarily need the word, usually a firm image was enough. Finally, the offending piece was removed and the last remainders of the storm fizzled out. Deanne sealed the reservoir on her gauntlet before she switched the primary collector back to the more passive *keep*.

Father would probably have given her the afternoon off after the chaos of such an event. But she knew she couldn’t afford to. There were more orders than there were hours in the day. If she was lucky Emeyla would be back soon so she could get her most recent builds out. She’d have to lecture her again, she’d gotten near a dozen letters from unhappy customers over the past month. Where’s my order? My collector was returned damaged; I needed my songweaver for this performance and it didn’t come in time. It all reflected badly on the shop. She’d heard a dozen times about how this poor service was uncharacteristic of the Ferra craftsmanship they were used to.

Well Song sworn, what else was she supposed to do? Before Deanne could start collecting the pieces though she heard a noise, was it snow pounding down on the roof? No that was definitely...a bark. Deanne glanced around and finally noticed a familiar red furry tail sticking out from underneath her bottom shelf.

“Hey,” she yelled, “how’d you get in here?”

As she got closer the hound came out from the shelf. Deanne instantly recognized Sino’s red muzzle. She nuzzled up against him petting him. Her heart jumped in her chest as she looked around. Did this mean Emeyla was finally back? Her eyes darted hopefully around the room.

“Sino, where’s Emeyla, boy?” Deanne asked as she wrapped the dog into her arms.

As the dog licked at her face she kept looking around. Maybe Emeyla had decided to come back by the temple embassy? She was late, her visa had expired two days ago. Even if Deanne would have to pay the fines at least she could get out more shipments. Deanne helped the hound out of his brass travelling harness. As she did she retrieved her notebook from the dog’s pack and noticed a letter tucked inside it.

Deanne and Mother,

Don’t worry, the money from the last payments is stored with Sino. I dropped off of the last of the packages earlier today. Sorry it took me so long. Unfortunately, something has come up. I finally found the trail I’ve been looking for-dad’s alive I know it. Ravenna too, and I’m going to

be gone a bit longer to finish this business. Should be home eventually, not sure when, hope business is going well.

Love,

Emeyla

Silence, Deanne swore as she crumpled up the note. She was grateful Emeyla had finally finished her deliveries but she needed her back here. Deanne looked to the wall where orders were starting to pile up. At least with the money she could hire a courier to start some of the other orders. She had no other choice at this point. Deanne paced around her cluttered workshop struggling with her emotions. Her heart pounded and her mind flashed with frustration, relief, and worry. Then she clenched her teeth and took a deep breath to help her focus.

Song sworn, she wished her sister would give up her foolish chase. She missed her father and Ravenna as much as Emeyla did. They were dead though, and she didn't have the time to spend chasing foolish hope. *They* didn't; now that her father was dead they had to pick up the same demand. He had been a very well established engraving pioneer. Everyone had admired his work. They seemed to expect the same from Deanne and her sister now. She was trying her best, but it was impossible enough without her sister constantly running off with her own agendas.

She'd tried to get Vincen to talk some sense into her but they weren't seeing eye to eye anymore. Shame really, they had been rather close in their youth. Vincen had always been

inseparable from his sister Ravenna. He'd been so happy when their sisters decided to be swornmates. But the last time they had seen each other they'd fought furiously, Deanne still didn't know the details. All she knew was Emeyla was now upset with him.

Vincen would want to know of this development regardless, he'd asked for the first sign of Emeyla nosing too deep into things to alert him at once. It made sense. The Firstborn were considered benevolent benefactors, but they wanted to forget about the expedition. Deanne would much rather her sister be caught prying into the wrong place by a friend rather than the less forgiving Firstborn. Deanne had her own suspicions about the "expedition" but she wasn't stupid enough to test the wrath of the Firstborn.

Before I tell Vincen though, I should tell mother first though. Deanne opened the door to the snowy clearing between the workshop and the main store. Sino darted out into the snow ignoring the well shoveled path that Deanne had so carefully carved earlier. Deanne followed Sino out into the snow making sure to shut the door to the workshop securely. The winters of Stonesbroke tended to be grueling, and the deep snow made it up nearly her knees. The cold wind blew across her face. This year had been extremely harsh, with several heavy snows, and even the usually flowing waterfall had frozen. Hopefully it wouldn't flood in the spring, though she'd made some preparations in case. It was a good thing she had a warm coat or the cold would have chilled her to the bone. Deanne followed Sino who was already scampering towards the back door of the quaint shop they called home. It was just a short distance from the workshop to the main store. Before she could close the door to the store behind her the howling wind slammed it against its frame for her.

“Take your shoes off, we don’t want puddles all over the floor,” her mother hollered at her as she bent at the door bench to remove her thick fur lined boots. Sino rushed ahead straight to her mother’s side and honestly could she really blame him for being excited? The hound had not seen his favorite mistress in over a month. As she put her coat on its respective hook Deanne heard a surprised gasp from her mother. Before she could move forward her mother rushed into the room glancing around excitedly. Her face fell as she only saw Deanne.

“I’m sorry mother,” Deanne said reluctantly, a bit embarrassed “Emeyla decided only to send Sino and the money back.”

“Again? This is not the first time she’s overstayed her visa. If I could, I’d make the trips with her. She’s been like this ever since Simun died,” her mother wrung her hands frustrated.

“She sent a note this time at least. She finally finished up deliveries. So you should take it as a good sign she’ll probably be home soon,” Deanne replied reassuringly. Her mother had taken her father’s death poorly. Mother seemed to spend nearly every day at the Temple Embassy chanting now. It seemed like the two of them, her and her sister, were all that were keeping her together some days.

“Here, see, she’ll be back soon,” She pressed the note into her mother’s hand as she looked furtively from her mother towards the hound.

Emeyla had only taken the few keys they’d had on hand when she’d left. Where had she gone? Odds were she was already gone from the Weeping Circle to wherever else she was chasing this foolishness. Emeyla would need to be tracked down before she ended up actually getting

herself into trouble though. With her supply list perhaps if she did some cross-referencing...maybe do some recollection reading. She could get Emeyla back sooner and avoid getting her into trouble. Whether that be from the Firstborn for the expired visa or to avoid her mother further heartbreak.

“Mother, I might be able to track down Emeyla, force her home if we’re quick enough. Can you send off Songpost to Vincen up at the manor? I could use his help.”

“She probably doesn’t even want to come home; she’s been gone for over a month now. She’s ignored all my letters,” Her mother muttered as she stumbled back to her chair.

“Nonsense, she’s just been busy,” Deanne began, “but if you want me to find her I’ll have to get straight to work. Realm recollections don’t last forever.”

“Very well,” her mother complained, “I think I might go down to the temple and chant for her safe return.”

“Mother, it’s freezing outside,” Deanne pointed out, “This is not the time to be making the trip up the mountain. Can’t you do your chants here? The Syng will hear it all the same.”

“But the temple is so peaceful, it helps me focus,” her mother asserted.

“At least call a cabbie, the gremlacks are much better suited to this weather.” Deanne had to look out for her mother. That was part of why Deanne had to move on so quickly, between her mother’s loss, keeping up the shop and her sister’s running she didn’t have time to focus on the

loss. Someone had to keep it all running together. Speaking of running, she should probably run off to track down her sister.

“I’ll be back, mother,” she said to her mother’s anxious face as she rushed to put her boots back on. Quickly she made her way back outside towards her workshop.

Several rushed hours later after Deanne had found her list of supplies and performed the necessary steps for a recollection. She felt scarcely closer than when she had begun. After cross-referencing the keys Emeyla had taken with her and the recollections she had learned some useful information but not enough to track Emeyla down. She took the metal harness and went over it again with her gauntlet muttering a few words. The sparks from her gauntlet danced around and formed faint little balls within the songweaver harness’s navigation map, each glowing with faint colors. The strongest and most recent burnt bright blue, obviously since Sino had just travelled here. Come on up, Deanne gestured with her gauntlet and the ghostly orbs soared up closer to her. Five, five orbs all moving outwards from each other.

She watched enamored as the faintly colored balls danced around each other. Around the blue recollection there were faint streams of what might be either orange or yellow...maybe red? It was hard to tell from impressed recollections. They weren’t highly helpful unless you already had some idea of what you were looking for.

Deanne let out a huge sigh. The sigh was accompanied by a pounding on the door of the workshop.

“I’m sorry mother, I’m still trying to work out things here,” she yelled at the door.

Instead of her mother's voice she heard the muffled familiar strong deep voice of a man through the door, "I'd prefer to not be called your mother, it's a bit strange."

Deanne moved from her work table to the door and opened it up. Instead of her mother it was the annoyingly handsome Vincen Cartier. Dark black hair, and nearly matching dark gray eyes, many girls had fallen for him all throughout their time knowing each other. None seemed to stick though. Regardless, he had arrived remarkably quick.

"My mother just sent word up to the manor, you must have sprinted down."

"Actually, no, I was, um, already on my way," Vincen pulled out a box of sugared chocolates from behind his back, "I recently cemented a deal to keep my-my family's wealth well established for several years, thought it might be nice to celebrate together?"

Vincen Cartier was the latest in a long line of successful merchants. Because of their wealth, mainly from trading ice and gold, they were as responsible as the Firstborn for having funded several of Stonebroke's key infrastructures. This deal was no doubt just the latest in his brilliant escapades, but she didn't have the time for it right now.

"Did you at least get her note?"

"Yes, I read it only a few moments ago. You said Emeyla was in trouble? How are the recollections coming along?" He implored drawing Deanne out from her thoughts for a moment.

“Well, she might be soon, says she’s found some lead towards the Forgotten Circle. They’re coming along some but less than I’d hoped,” she ushered him in glad for the company. Vincen scurried by towards her workplace. He watched the dancing recollections in the middle of the workshop. His thick eyebrows seemed to be nervously flicking around.

“Thank you for alerting me immediately,” Cartier replied, “I worry for her as well. Have you had any luck?”

“Yes, but it could be one of four or so realms so...” Deanne sighed and pushed the list towards him.

Cartier took a closer look at the list. He browsed his fingers near ghostly beads. With his know how he probably could help her narrow down the list a bit. His eyes lit up with excitement as he chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” she asked annoyed.

“Well it can’t be the key to the fifth circle, if she just delivered her package she’s leaving the Weeping Circle and if she obviously wouldn’t leave the Weeping Circle using one of its own keys-”

“So three Circles, that’s still more ground than we could ever hope to cover before the Firstborn,” Deanne interjected.

“No, the Adamant Circle is currently under quarantine, there’s a plague that’s ravaging the local population. So it can’t be a red key, I doubt she’d be reckless enough to travel there. On top of

that you need high level clearance to even enter the Golden Circle so she's definitely not there. So she has to be somewhere in the Circle of Isles, it's the only key left it could be."

He smiled at her, giving off a genuine laugh of excitement. Those were rare these days, ever since the expedition he had been much less prone to laughter. After all, he had led the failed expedition. A lot of the people in the valley blamed him for the loss of a loved one. He'd lost his own sister. Deanne could only imagine how rough it must be for him, but Vincen rarely talked about what he had gone through.

"That's still a lot of ground, though if that's true she'll have to head towards civilization soon to get more keys," Deanne responded.

Deanne shuffled around her workbench to a crooked bookshelf. She waved aside some dust as she passed over a couple of diagrams and towards a heavy book near the top of the shelf. With some effort she pulled out the book and put it down upon the table.

"The Comprehensive Circle Compendium? I see you're into light reading," Vincen raised an eyebrow and chuckled.

"Anyone who does engraving *has* to have a copy," Deanne explained, "Even if the songweaver only contains a few marked doorways for each Circle you have to know the surrounding area and the margin of error. You don't want to be the engraver who had her client end up in quicksand instead of their target. Right, circle eight, the Circle of Isles, Help me look for circled entry points and we might be able to make an educated guess."

“Why circled? You could at least explain that much,”

“The ones father circled are the ones more likely on his songweaver, and since Emeyla’s been using it, that information can help us narrow down the search range further,” Deanne said as she gazed across the detailed map.

The Circle of Isles was one of the smaller realms, primarily ocean with a few scattered islands. It had only a few of those islands large enough to live upon and a little over 300 viable doorways for travel between realms. As Deanne pored over the map all the ink started to run together. The fractured islands, the remnants of long ago fire breathing mountains dotted the landscape. There were very few settlements. Most of the livable islands were privately owned by the very well off.

After what seemed several hours Deanne had finally finished documenting the circled doorways. Out of all the doorways her father had limited himself to twelve including the three major settlements.

“The best technique moving forward is to send word to the three settlements to keep an eye out if anyone matching her description has recently left or entered the outposts. These three doorways are close together so you could maybe send a few of your guards there and we could spread out the rest between us.”

Deanne handed the compiled list to Vincen with a tired look on her face.

"I just can't handle this all by myself, I need her back here to help. If we don't find her I won't pester you a second time."

"You stopping pestering me? That'd be a sight to see," Vincen gave her a playful wink. It flustered her for some reason.

But then he said more seriously, "Don't worry, I want to help. I don't want to see her hurt any more than you do. You need your rest as well, take a nap. I'll take care of this, you look exhausted."

Emeyla:

Emeyla had followed the strange man for some time. Goosebumps were all over her body. The water had seeped into her clothes from the river, her body shivered in response. The wind that was picking up was not helping, it seemed to chill her straight into her bones. She looked towards the man she was following.

"Who are you?" She asked curiously.

"Eun stuvo ban panbara. It doesn't matter if we can't get off this rock."

"Don't you have a songweaver? How'd you get here in the first place?" Emeyla asked even more intrigued by his strange language.

Before he could answer she heard a dreaded shriek. Echoing powerful baritones able to be heard from near and far. Another cry responded, and another. Emeyla instantly recognized the cry of Hunters. The Hunters were the Firstborn's preferred mercenaries, more often heard

about then seen. They were best known for the slaughter of Stirall, where they had utterly crushed an independence protest by radical scholars. Some had said the stones of Stirall were still stained red from that day. This was clearly not about her expired visa.

“What did you do to infuriate the Firstborn so much?” She yelled at the man.

“Says the strange woman who just conveniently showed up searching for me. You’re one of them aren’t you? Well you aren’t capturing me again.”

Emeyla cursed as the man dashed off in a sprint. She rushed after him. From the rumors, she wasn’t sure the Hunters would be any kinder to her than the stranger.

Her heart raced as she stumbled through the thick trees and down the path of the stream. She wove through the trees fearing for her life. The cries grew nearer. From behind her she could see glimpses of red robes, colors of the Hunters. She tried to catch her breath as she leaned against one of the strange trees. Was she fine? Had she lost them?

Emeyla heard the high pitched whistling in her ear. No, she had not lost the Hunters. As the Song was about to clench down upon Emeyla she thrust her Songweaver at it. The two connected in a shower of competing sparks as the gauntlet attempted to disperse the unwelcome invader.

“He’s somewhere over here.” One of the Hunters recognized the resistance. Emeyla looked towards her incoming aggressors.

The air around her started to burn like fire. The heat was suffocating. Never-ending silvery blue smoke seemed to be engulfing around her. All of Emeyla's senses were overwhelmed. The baritone shouts echoing around her. Her nose assaulted by the smoke, she coughed and sputtered. Her lungs heaved begging for air as her skin winced out in pain from the overwhelming heat. She needed to do something. She looked around desperate for anything. She needed to claw her way out towards air.

She kept running. Emeyla's senses started to recover a little bit as she found herself in a cave. She must have stumbled into during the Hunter attack. Her heart pounded against her ribcage. Just keep pressing forward, maybe if you're lucky the Hunters will realize their real prey has gone another direction.

Then as suddenly as out of nowhere, she tumbled into a chasm, limbs flailed for but a moment. Then, suddenly a sharp fiery pain shot up her arm as she hit the chasm floor.

She gritted her teeth as she carefully sat up. Her right arm throbbed with pain. With her left she thought she felt blood ebbing from it. It was hard to tell how much though; the cavern was very dark. Her gauntlet flickered faintly, something had smashed during the fall and it was leaking clouds of Song. Frustrated she tried to move her left leg to stand up. It refused to answer her call. Of course it would be broken. The pit she had fallen into must have been deep. If she had not been so well padded by her thick coat, most likely her ribs would be broken. Is this the way I'm supposed to go? Alone in the dark, helpless?

"No," she said to herself, "you can get yourself out of this."

She dragged herself across the floor of the pit towards the only light she could see, the faintly gleaming Song spiraling away. Her body heaved with each pull. Emeyla couldn't feel her foot. The Hunters seemed less important now. Though she could still hear them above her. Screeching and searching. Emeyla heard faint voices then heard the familiar Song, much stronger. Misty blue light glimmered faintly in the cavern above her. The Hunters must have caught up.

Slowly the blue light illuminated a single Hunter. Had that really been just one of them? It was clad from head to toe in sand and soot. The sand encrusted red robe parted and she could just glimpse underneath what looked like a black metal shells encasing its chests. The armor extended up to its head-heads? It was there a strange triangular helm took over. She couldn't tell the face; it was kept in a dark helm with only a single thin slit as an opening.

She watched as its songweaver manipulated the Song into forming a glittery rope. The Hunter made its way down, slowly illuminating the pit. She had fallen a substantial distance. As the light grew stronger she felt the intense heat once again. It seemed to emanate from underneath its own shell. As it got closer it seemed like the thin slit in its helm was glowing, a haunting orange light. It surveyed the room, the orange light bathing over her for a moment. Then it moved around the chasm examining it further. Emeyla thought she saw something on the other side of the cavern, but it was so briefly lit she couldn't make it out clearly.

Before she could figure out what the something was the Hunter pulled out a softly glowing blue key. It placed it in its Songweaver then stepped through a misty door. Why had it left? Maybe it had realized Emeyla wasn't its prey and left. Or maybe it had gone to gather the others, those

cries seemed to suggest there were more than just one on the island. Emeyla did not have much time to be left alone with her thoughts. Shortly another brilliant blue door formed before her. Great, the Hunter was back.

Though this time it had brought company...Out of the door tumbled a familiar chiseled face. Perfectly combed hair stood above a fitted coat with familiar startling scarlet patterns, over a muddied, but clearly white undershirt. The thickly furred collar of his coat rustled slightly as he walked out onto the cold stone. He waved a golden songweaver and stopped suddenly as he noticed Emeyla.

"This-is not what it looks like." He insisted looking at her. The man examined her beaten body and his bright green eyes flashed with worry.

"Vincen Cartier," she spat, "what are you doing mixed up in all this? I didn't know you were still the Firstborn's lapdog."

The two stared at each other intently. The air tasted stale. Emeyla winced as more blood continued to drip from the wound on her leg. Her arm was bleeding as well.

"Emeyla, shut up. Please. You've been hurt, and are obviously confused. Everything will be alright. Just-don't do anything. Don't say anything."

The Hunter pointed something out to Cartier. He looked over to where they pointed.

Illuminated by their Songweavers she could now more clearly see the other side of the pit.

What she saw was the man Emeyla had encountered. The man seemed to have similarly

sustained some injuries though he was still clearly alive, wheezing. The Hunter's songweaver conducted the misty Song to condense around the man, illuminating his body clearly as they wrapped around him like silvery chains.

Vincen leaned in closely and whispered some words Emeyla couldn't hear. She also couldn't hear the man's reply. Vincen looked to the nearby Hunter though and nodded. The man's face turned to one of sheer shock. Then in an instant the Hunter snapped his fingers. The chains started tightening violently. The man seized and let out a blood curdling scream. A thundering crack filled the chasm from what Emeyla could only imagine was the man's bones breaking. She could see viscera spraying out of him among the pale lights. Among the spray though she saw a key bounce across the rock near her. One unfamiliar.

The silver glowing key came to rest near her. Emeyla looked over it. She had never seen the like in any key stall. No, it was familiar. She had only seen it one time before...Ravenna had showed her the keys they were using for the expedition before they left. How had she forgotten? It had to be a key to the Forgotten Circle. Ravenna, her father, she could find them if only-she went to reach out for it.

Then Vincen and the Hunter turned to her. Emeyla winced from the ground as Vincen snatched the key from the ground. She stared at his leather boots firmly planted upon the cold stones instead of looking him in the eye. What was he doing? He handed the key to the Hunter. The Hunter pocketed it.

“That’s the key. The key to the Forgotten Circle! You’ve got to let me have it. I could find father; I could find Ravenna. Vincen, please.” She begged looking into his eyes.

Vincen looked at her. Then he lifted his right hand speaking quietly, “Be contained,”

Vincen Cartier’s golden gauntlet’s Song swirled over his wrist and around his hand. As he beckoned with his palm Emeyla felt the silvery blue mist, like vines bind her arm, they moved past her arm across the rock floor towards her legs. Gently Vincen touched his gloved hand to her leg. She could feel the Song tightening around her like chains and it chilled her to the bone. Emeyla watched transfixed as the swirling mist arched out over his fingers to capture her in a chilling prison.

What was he doing? Emeyla could see Vincen frown. The Hunter stood hauntingly next to him and intimidating shadow. Vincen looked at the Hunter.

“She’s seen too much; you can’t let her go. Kill her now or I’ll do it myself.” The Hunter’s voice echoed out across the chamber.

No. No. This could not be happening. Was not happening. Vincen had been her friend since childhood. They had grown up together. Her heart raced. Her breath halted. She watched Vincen wordlessly. His whole countenance seemed shaken. His eyes flickered between her and the Hunter. His own breath was panicked. He clenched his fist and his breath steadied. Who was this man and what had he done with Vincen? The man she’d known growing up could never have murdered her in cold blood.

“Vincen, please.” she desperately asked.

“Emeyla, I’m going to say this one last time shut up.”

Emeyla was in shock. Vincen closed his eyes. Of course he couldn’t bear to look her in the eye.

Wasn’t even man enough to look her in the eye as he did it.

She was utterly surprised to see him shift direction towards the just as surprised Hunter. The air was filled with screeching and blue smoke as Vincen’s songweaver propelled Song towards the Hunter. The Hunter retaliated and Emeyla could barely see what was happening through the dense clouds that appeared around them. Arcs like lightning spiraled between them and misty blue smoke filled her lungs.

Emeyla coughed and hacked searching for breath. The Song screeched violently, assaulting her ears. The noise started to cloud out nearly everything else, an unhuman pitch. Sparks crashed towards each other. The smoke faded enough for her to see the Hunter thrusting a knife shaped of lightning towards Vincen, who danced out of the way with ease parrying the strike. Who was this? The Vincen she knew could never have stood toe to toe with a Hunter. He was a merchant not a soldier.

She could hear the singing rising around her. The Song piercing its unfamiliar language. Vincen fell to his knees, collapsing from the pain, coughing blood. The Hunter was still singing its terrible terror, now in a dreadful crescendo. The knife glimmered as it plunged down towards Vincen. Emeyla’s heart seemed to stop in her chest.

Song bristled across Vincen's body as he growled from the effort. His skin rippled, the Song formed shimmering spiked claws around his hands that stopped the blade. Vincen's face contorted into sheer determination. Vincen got back to his feet, darting towards his assailant and skewered the Hunter with his ethereal claws. The Hunter howled an unearthly shriek and then shuddering fell to the ground.

Emeyla shuddered and pulled away even as Vincen turned towards her coughing.

"You will tell no one of what you've seen. If the Firstborn get so much as a hint that I killed one of their Hunters their wrath will know no bounds."

Emeyla bristled as he came closer to her, "You killed a Hunter. How-when-who are you?"

"You know me I'm Vincen. Now please, we have to go. *Now.*"

"No you're not. Why were you with it in the first place? You were the one who led the damned expedition! You have to tell me what happened. You have to give me that key at least I need-"

"No Emeyla," Cartier spat, "There's no time. Oh and by the way, I'll be taking that songweaver as well. The Firstborn are already breathing down my neck-now this? You have no idea the damage you would release if you managed to breach that Circle unprepared."

Vincen Cartier's face was filled with cold fury and his gauntlet was spitting sparks again.

Reluctantly she offered her hand towards him. The argument was getting nowhere. Whoever he was would be just as stubborn as she was.

“Fine, keep your secrets for now,” she said, “let’s go.”

Vincen opened a Door. Emeyla was about to follow him but then felt a stinging sensation in her head. She fell to the ground. The combination of shock and blood loss must have been getting to her. Emeyla-

CHAPTER 5

TOGETHER AGAIN

Emeyla:

Emeyla felt the chill emanate from the ice below her. She held the forged skates in her hand as she looked at Ravenna's bemused face.

"Come on, tie them already," Ravenna teased.

She tied the skates and fumbled out upon the ice. She wildly swayed her arms as she struggled to keep her balance. Ravenna laughed as she pirouetted towards her. Before Emeyla reached her she fell, the hard ice of the river meeting her too quickly. As Emeyla struggled to her feet off of the icy blue-white landscape she took a glance at some of the kids further down running around on their own shoddy skates.

"I've never been good at this," she complained.

"That's why you practice," Ravenna lectured as she offered a thickly gloved hand.

Emeyla felt the warmth. It tingled slightly as she looked up into Ravenna's eyes. She'd never noticed how pretty her eyes were before. They sparkled like the snowflakes that fell around them. Her heart felt lighter for a moment. What was this feeling? She rose up into Ravenna's arms confused. Ravenna smiled back at her encouragingly as she led her further upon the ice.

"Alright, now you've got this," she shouted as she let go and pushed her forward.

Emeyla steadied her breath. She concentrated upon her direction and her friend. She moved her feet, she was doing it, moving steadily forward. With Ravenna by her side she could accomplish anything even ice skating. Emeyla could feel the warmth spread throughout her chest, a mixture of pride and longing. This strange warmth continued to envelop her bursting until it reached every corner and crooks of her body.

The warmth continued to gently spread across her face. The warmth is what woke her up.

Where was she now? Emeyla wondered as she felt the soft cushioning of a featherbed underneath her. Groaning she remembered where she was before she even opened her eyes.

Emeyla opened them to the mosaic covered walls, the gentle crinkling of the fireplace across the room, and the rug covered floors all screamed the Cartier estate to her. The room was further illuminated by wall sconces holding dancing blue light. Sitting across from the bed illuminated by this pale blue light on a linen covered chair was the first thing that brought her a smile.

Her mother.

She looked much older since they'd last met but the wrinkles on her face seemed to go away as she smiled. Emeyla smiled back, though nervous.

"Emeyla," her mother whispered through eyes glistening with tears, "we were afraid we had lost you. I chanted at the Temple day and night for you. The Song blessed us with your return."

Emeyla tried to sit up, aching as she threw her arms around her mother. The warm embrace was comforting. She had never been happier to smell her mother's old sourberry medicine. She

ignored the pungent smell as she fell into the moment. Her face buried into her mother's graying hair Emeyla sighed deeply in relief. Then as her memory came flooding back to her she raised a concerned eyebrow.

"What happened? How long have I..."

"Last night Vincen sent a letter down to our house saying he'd found you, though you were unconscious. He immediately took you here, he had the esoteric caring for your body day and night ever since. You should thank him."

"As much as I appreciate him saving my life, I think it balances out all things considered,"

Emeyla got up and for the first time glanced at her arm. Her left arm, the one that had been so broken was covered in a cast of shimmering Songcloth. Iridescent, it looked as if her arm had been bathed in opals. She tried flexing the fingers, it was painful but they seemed to hold their full-range of motion. Both fearful and cautious she looked underneath her sheet. Her legs were bound similarly in their own Songcloth. Emeyla could feel it pulsate around her.

"Seems like I've got some trophies for a bit. At least they don't clash with my hair," Emeyla tossed out, trying to laugh at the situation. Her mother gripped her hand tightly, frowning. Her arm shimmered slightly in the shifting flames of the fireplace.

"What were you thinking running off like that? Not answering my letters either? We always had one rule when you were off running deliveries." Her mother sighed as her eyes seemed to stare into Emeyla's soul. Ripples of shame cascaded down her face.

"I'm sorry," Emeyla admitted with a lump in her throat, "I just needed the time to myself. Like you have the temple, the road is just how I'm coping with things."

Her mother was still holding her tight. She knew it was not fair to leave her mother and Emeyla to themselves. Emeyla had to keep on the road though, travelling, it was the best way to cope. After the events in the Circle of Isles Emeyla felt even stronger that even if her father and Ravenna were dead, she had been lied to about how they died. She deserved the truth, mother deserved the truth.

"We're so lucky that Vincen was able to find you at Murkahan." Her mother gave her a sad smile. Wait a minute, did she say Murkahan? That's not where they were. They were nowhere near that port. Why had Cartier lied?

Before she could question her mother further the door flew open. Cartier and a snow-laden creature stepped into the room. Cartier's eyes opened wide as he noticed Emeyla sitting up. A huge smile came upon his face as he stepped forwards towards her arms open wide.

Emeyla rejected his embrace, "Thank you for everything...Cartier," she responded as she pushed him away. She still couldn't comprehend everything that had recently happened.

"This doesn't mean I trust you," she clarified further.

"I...", Cartier shifted thoughts as he moved away from Emeyla towards a corner of the room. The snow laden esoteric had moved closer past her mother's chair and the fireplace. Emeyla had seen their red mantles before in the main town of Stonesbroke. This was her first time seeing one up close though.

This esoteric was a human woman though that was hard to recognize underneath the glowing rusty red runes that painted her face. They looked like the text of a book stretching in finely arranged lines tattooed down across her eyelids and cheeks. She could see the curious patterns continued upon the rest of her skin as well.

“Allow me to name myself, I am Jyn. I see you have regained enough strength to wake up and move around slightly. How are you feeling?”

“A bit groggy, but not feeling terrible, this Songcloth does wonders,” glad for an excuse to shift the conversation away from Cartier, Emeyla focused on the caregiver. Emeyla wiggled her left arm to emphasize what she was talking about. Jyn’s painted face hid any emotions well as she moved forward with careful precision to examine the hand. She beckoned at both Cartier and her mother to leave.

“Shoo, you summoned me here all the way up the mountain. So let me take care of my patient.”

Cartier left right away, frowning on his way out. Her mother was a bit more reluctant but after some careful words of encouragement made her way out of her chair and through the heavy wooden door. Emeyla glanced over to Jyn. She didn’t know what to expect from the master physician. Jyn gave her an encouraging smile though and Emeyla softened up.

“Thanks for getting rid of Cartier. I couldn’t stand being in the same room with him for a moment longer.”

“Odd words about a man who is willing to pay so much for your health. Can you stretch out your arm like this? There you go, now hold still while I examine it. Can I ask you a few questions while I examine you?”

“Sure,”

“Was this your first trip to the Circle of Isles? Have you kept up with your travelling inoculations?”

“No, my father usually handled the packages there. I did receive my injections six years ago though,” she replied uninterested.

“You should get a booster; the realms are often dotted with diseases your body has no natural defenses against otherwise. How can you evolve to resist something that doesn’t exist in your native circle? Take the Adamant Circle, a few people forget to take precautions and they’ve got a nasty plague going on there right now. Just a few more basic questions, age, any history of medical problems?”

“Twenty-one years according to our circle’s rotation. My mother suffers headaches but that’s the only medical issues I know of.”

The esoteric urged her with more questions as she molded the Songcloth with various metallic tools. Emeyla could feel her gloved hands on her skin as she pushed back the bed robe sleeve. After having pricked and prodded all the way up and down her arm Jyn consulted a chart from her bag of tools. Emeyla waiting stared at the Songcloth swirling around her arm. It spread all

the way up to just below her left elbow. Glancing around further she noticed the fire was still going strong, it must have been exhaust from the fire that initially woke her up, the grated window was closed shut. Emeyla could just glance a glimpse of the snow covered valley outside. The room was one she had never been in before, just slightly smaller than the resting room of her family home.

Jyn was frowning. Carefully she removed a sharp looking needle from her tool bag.

“I’ll have to take another blood sample just to make sure you’re not infected,” the esoteric informed her as she brandished the needle.

“Whatever you need to do,” she nodded to indicate she was ready. The sister took the sharp looking instrument and gripped Emeyla’s arm tightly. Emeyla closed her eyes prepared to wince. The sharp metal was painful for but a moment before the grip on her arm relaxed. The sister dropped a small sample of her swirling blood into liquid in a glass bottle. It turned a vivid orange. With a word and a wave, the esoteric’s songweaver closed the wound.

“You did well dear. As far I can see your arm should fully heal in a few days. I’ll have to leave the Songcloth on to finish the job. It shouldn’t cause too many problems, not prohibiting or inhibiting too much movement. Your legs are healing much quicker, I’d recommend stretching it out and those will be back to normal in no time.”

“Is there anything I can do to speed up the process?” Emeyla asked somewhere between relieved and incredulous. She let out a long sigh and her shoulders drooped.

"You're lucky to be alive. Just try to relax, walk around a little bit and get the muscles moving again. You'll be sore for the next few days. I'll explain some care techniques to your sister and your mother. Just stay here."

Emeyla recognized the weight of her own legs as Jyn left the bed and the room. Emeyla tried standing up trying to recover her balance. As she was walking around she heard a familiar bark as the door opened and her sister came in trying to restrain an over-excited Sino. Despite her sister's best wishes, the dog pounced upon Emeyla who's legs promptly gave out. As she lay on the floor she ruffled his ears as he continually licked her face.

"Sino, Sino, stop smothering her. Bad dog,"

Her sister was only a year older than her, though much taller. Deanne hadn't changed at all since she'd left. Her sister still had her beautiful long hair in its signature braids, and thick muscles from all her time working in her father's workshop. She'd been gorgeous for years and it didn't look like that'd change anytime soon. From Emeyla's new angle on the floor she suddenly seemed much taller than usual. Deanne yanked the dog off of Emeyla and offered her a hand up. Emeyla could feel the slippery oil upon her palm as Deanne helped her up with one arm, the other holding back a rambunctious Sino.

"You've been working on the collectors again I see. Got some new deliveries for me already?" She chuckled.

"I think we'll be using a courier for the foreseeable future. I'm just glad you're still in one piece., How are you feeling?" her sister asked, her eyes flickering towards the glimmering limbs.

"The esoteric said everything should recover into working condition," Emeyla noted dryly.

Her sister smiled for a moment, "that's wonderful," then her face turned sternly serious, "what you were thinking? Running off like that was dangerous. No notes for over a month! You have responsibilities, you can't just run off any time you get a hankering for adventure or feel sorry for yourself! Late deliveries, I had customers shouting at me left and right. Expired visa, luckily Vincen's covering that little hiccup for us. Then deciding to run off on a wild gremleck chase instead of coming home-If Vincen hadn't found you..."

Emeyla groaned, so that's why she's here-to lecture me. "Deanne, I'm not just running off. She's still out there. Ravenna's still alive, father's still alive I know it. Cartier knows it. Deanne I've seen evidence there's more to this than we know. If you could only give me a few weeks off I could find them, I know I would."

From the look on her face Deanne was not buying her pleas, she didn't touch on Ravenna though, "The collectors are a reliable product, gauntlets are reliable products, everybody needs one, or everybody needs one repaired. They're a steady source of income and I need all the help I can get to meet the demand. I need you here Emeyla, not just in body, but in mind as well. I miss father and Ravenna too. But running around in circles won't get them back."

"We've *all* gone through those struggles. How do you think I felt when...?"

"Working with the Firstborn is what got father and Ravenna killed. The Firstborn want this mess hushed up. You know what happens to the Firstborn's enemies. If you continue to look into this, you'll eventually become their enemy too. I-we, can't afford to lose you. Mother barely

spends a day away from the Temple as it is. She's spiraling away. If something happened to you too I don't think she could take it. She needs your head in the game, to stay here and help me."

"You might want to forget, everyone might want to forget, but I can't. It's not the Forgotten Circle, it's the circle where I lost Ravenna and father. If there is even the slightest chance they're alive I owe it to mother, to me, to them-to do what I can to bring them back."

Emeyla trailed off as painful memories came into focus. For a moment she caught Deanne's eyes, they reminded her of the same muddy brown as their father. Deanne frowned briefly and took her by the hand. Free of his leash, Sino ran back around on the floor of the room. He dashed around a bit before pawing at the door. Deanne took a glance at the door and back at her sister. Emeyla tried to flash a fake grin, but Deanne didn't seem to be buying it. She took Emeyla's hand and wrapped it around her shoulder.

"Come on, let's go for a walk, it'll do both you and Sino some good. Jyn says you need to stretch every once and while to help it heal properly."

Wobbling a little bit Emeyla supported by her sister made her way past the doorway. The hall was slightly colder than the room giving Emeyla some goosebumps. Carefully she made her steps across the hall with her sister in tow. She noticed the newly laid glass floors, the renovation must have cost a fortune to import the skilled workers necessary, but then again the Cartier family had never been lacking in money. Emeyla shuddered, the more familiar mosaicked walls were decorated with family portraits from ancestors past, the faces changed

but the haughtiness always stayed the same. Deanne tried to draw her attention with some casual conversation.

“While you’ve been gone we’ve had to have a couple of interesting customers. Had a yen navigator stop by the other day and you know how rare yen are in this realm. Had to get a songweaver fixed, the metal had been warped. Gemein model, I didn’t even know they still made those! There was a whole group of snake creatures from the Weeping Circle that came by the other day. Couldn’t understand a word they said, but they gave us a lot of good metal. Might be able to melt some down and make you a new songweaver once Vincen’s calmed down. He’s still refusing to give father’s back, but maybe I could convince him in time.”

Emeyla scowled, “So Cartier’s keeping the gauntlet after all? I was hoping I might be able to convince him to give it back. I don’t want a new gauntlet. Dad’s works just fine.”

“*Vincen* didn’t mean to open another wound...I miss him too you know. It has been a long year without him. The whole shop is different without him. Hey, speaking of father I wanted to show you something,” Suddenly Deanne shifted her hands. Before Emeyla could react Deanne swung Emeyla up into her arms and started prancing down the hallway. Emeyla wanted to struggle, but also didn’t want to knock herself out of the much larger Deanne’s grip.

“Where are you taking me?” She laughed, starting to have childhood memories bustle up inside of her. They headed through an open door but before she could see where they were going she got a big face full of her sister’s braids. Spitting out the disgusting locks she complained, “You

really ought to cut your hair, it's going to be at your feet soon. Doesn't it get in the way when you work?"

"So what I should hack it all short like you do?" Deanne took a moment to catch a breath as she shifted Emeyla back towards her feet. "Some of us actually like to look like women on occasion, and braids work well enough so far. Anyway, we're here."

The Cartier trophy hall. She hadn't been here in ages. Not since her and Cartier had fought earlier this year. Deanne led her over towards a portrait hanging on the far end of the room. It was something new. What appeared to be a large oil painting hanging on the wall. It portrayed the meadow outside of Stonesbroke, she knew the trees overshadowing a smiling group. In the middle of them stood a lean man with thinning hair and a gray mustache, her father. Emeyla's heart fluttered slightly as she saw the old familiar grin on his face. Emeyla's eyes continued to scour over the painting. It was beautiful, and the likeness of her father was incredible. Her eyes flicked back towards the painting. Right next to her father was a Vincen looking just as smug...and next to him was... *her*. The familiar face with large shimmering eyes it was unmistakable.

"When did..." She started,

Deanne held her shoulder into a tighter grasp, "Vincen pulled it out of storage a few months ago. He wanted some sort of memorial to them since the Firstborn have hushed things up. I thought you might appreciate it...I know how much you miss them. We all do too."

"I...I...thanks. I'm sorry. I know I must have worried you sick not replying to your letters. Sorry for delaying the deliveries, I've just been so busy looking for evidence," Emeyla teared up as she leant her face upon her sister.

"I think I knew this was coming eventually, you never listen to me. Listen to me now though, please, you can't run off like that again. Mom, was completely petrified when you stopped sending letters. She's terrified of losing you too. You've got to start to move forward. You should talk to Vincen; after all she was his sister. I know he must miss her just as much as you do."

"Thanks for the walk," Emeyla interrupted, she didn't want to even think about talking to Cartier after the events in the cave. She didn't even know who he was anymore. All she knew was that he was waist-deep in business with the Firstborn on this cover up. He knew much more than he was telling.

"I'm getting tired again. Hopefully I'll feel steady enough to join you at home tomorrow." She deflected.

"Fine, be that way," Deanne huffed frustrated, "At least try to keep your chin up, I'll leave Sino with you this evening, mother needs me at home." Deanne scowled as she guided Emeyla away from the painting and back towards her guest room.

CHAPTER 6

NEGOTIATING NORMALCY

Deanne:

The rhythm of the Song drummed softly in the back of Deanne's mind. She needed to mold it. She felt an urgency to do so as if it was in her very nature. At the same time, she shuddered from the cold, the whole room was filled with an unnatural chill.

"Couldn't we do this with a collector back home?" "No," her father had replied, "A master of the Syng learns the untamed melody, learns to summon it and command it to her will. If you never learn all the notes you will never control the Syng only toy with it."

Her hair blew wildly in the wild winds that filled the Temple Embassy. She had signed up for this, asked father to teach her his craft. This...was not what she had expected. Instead of teaching her how to mold, how to engrave he had started by forcing her to listen to the wild, untasted power of the Song. For days, every day she would come to the Temple Embassy and sit in front of the Eternal Door. An enormous archway of Song forever gathered and singing throughout the temple, uncontained, untamed.

This seemed an odd way to begin an apprenticeship. She had wanted to forge songweavers, bend the Song to her will. This was a place of spirituality, not practicality. She had to learn, prove she was capable, she could be as good as her father. She would learn, and one day she would be just as well-known, an even more renowned engraver worthy of carrying on the family business. Deanne closed her eyes and tried desperately to listen.

The outside was quiet except for the whisper of the chilling wind. Deanne was glad for the warm boots as she worked her way through their snow sprinkled wood stack. The low sun shone auspiciously through the knotted woods behind their shop. She brushed off some of the snow on her chopping block before she continued her swings. She could smell the savory tastes of dinner cooking wafting from the main shop. It would be delicious, but first she had to make sure there was enough wood for the night.

The *crack* was satisfying as she split another woodblock. The pile looked like it had grown large enough for the evening. Was there anything else that needed done?

"I think that's enough wood, you should come in and socialize. Emeyla's been home for nearly an hour now," she couldn't help but smile as she felt the furry paw upon her shoulder.

"Then why aren't you still catching up?" She asked Vincen. He had snuck up on her in the snow. His thick, white fox fur coat had almost blended in with the snow. It was a change from his usually preferred scarlet.

"Your mother would appreciate both of her daughters to be present for the celebration, you know how excited she is to have everyone back together, she hasn't had the two of you in a room in over a month." he elaborated.

"I am going to be present," Deanne explained, "Someone has to make sure there's enough wood for the fires though, or else it'll be a very cold celebration."

“And I’m *sure* that’s the only reason why you’ve been out here for hours,” Vincen gave a knowing look, “Look stop being resentful, or nervous whichever one is more accurate. Believe it or not Emeyla underwent a lot this past trip. She could really use her sister. Now get in there already before I have to drag you in.”

She turned the dial on her songweaver reluctantly. The shimmering axe in her palm melted away into a few small clouds.

“You just volunteered to help me carry in the firewood then,” After filling Vincen’s arms to the brim she took her own handful of firewood. Deanne made her way towards the door.

“I am excited to see her. It’s just, difficult acting like she wants to be here. She’ll run off again as soon as she gets the chance. She’s also been even more furious with you since she got back-and I didn’t think that was possible. This is going to end poorly.”

Deanne followed her friend across the snow towards the house. The winters of Stonesbroke tended to be harsh, and the deep snow past her cleared chopping circle made it up to nearly her knees. It was a good thing she had a warm coat or the cold would have chilled her to the bone. It was just a short distance to the main shop but the snow made it more difficult to traverse. Before she could close the door to the shop behind her the howling wind slammed it against its frame.

“Take your boots off, we don’t want puddles all over the floor,” her mother hollered. After depositing her part of the firewood, she bent at the door bench to remove her boots. She left her songweaver by the door as well. No need for that this evening off. Vincen rushed past her

to finish off the swirling contents of an ale. It did not look like the first one he'd had this evening. Come on, Deanne, try to be excited. You wanted this to happen. As she put her coat on its respective hook she tried to move her mind elsewhere as her sister entered her view.

"Emeyla! So good to have you home!"

"It's so good to see you too, took you long enough! I was starting to worry I'd be stuck with Cartier all night," Emeyla exclaimed throwing her arms around Deanne.

"He has a name, you should use it sometime," Deanne muttered annoyed.

Despite the annoyance Deanne embraced her back. She couldn't help but stare at the strange Songcloth on her sister's arm. So shimmering and shiny, she wanted to take some and examine it in her workshop. She'd spent her life learning about the Song and engravings, but Songcloth was part of a different school than her father had taught. It would be fascinating to learn how to recreate it herself. Tearing her eyes back towards her sister's face she let her go.

"So the esoteric finally cleared your health? I can't believe you took so long to recover. Have you asked Vincen about his latest sale? You might actually find it an entertaining story." she asked half curious even though she expected another rude reply from Emeyla.

"No, of course not! I'm glad to be back home. I get he wants to talk. He kept on trying to talk to me or inviting me to go on walks with him, *as if*. If he wants to apologize he could say it anytime he wants." Emeyla made her familiar disgusted face she reserved for the mention of Vincen. She glared over his direction. He gave her a dirty look with furrowed eyebrows.

"Maybe after you apologize to your own family for running out on them," he growled back.

Who thought having these two together in a room had been a good idea? Deanne instinctively lifted her hand forgetting she wasn't wearing her gauntlet.

"Hey, calm down. Can't we have a simple night together as family and friends?" She interrupted.

"No we can't, because *he* got father killed. Not to mention-"

"I tried everything I could to get everyone home safe, it wasn't my fault-"

"Not your fault? They wouldn't have left in the first place if it wasn't for you."

"...and I have to live with that,"

"No, we *all* have to live with your mistakes."

Deanne growled. Emeyla lecturing Vincen on being selfish? The irony was overwhelming. She might have slapped her sister if it hadn't been for her mother interrupting them from the next room.

"Girls, Vincen, it's time for supper, clean up and gather around the table," Deanne heard mother calling from the other room. The interruption led to a grateful escape from the rising tempers. Vincen rushed towards the next room and Deanne sighed with relief. Please, let's just try to get through the night without those two killing each other.

"Me first at the font," Emeyla yelled as she darted towards the font grumpily.

Deanne chuckled as she ducked her hands into the washbowl near the fire scrubbing them together. The pipes had frozen a few nights ago. Emeyla would have known that if she'd been here. The water was lukewarm but it did the job quick enough. Soon enough the grease and sweat was all off her hands. Emeyla gave a howl of annoyance when the font wouldn't work.

"Washbowl's by the fire. See you at the table!" Deanne called cheerily as she strode through into the storefront.

The store counter had undergone transformation for the occasion and instead of covered with shiny brass collectors and half engraved silver plated songweavers was now covered with delicious looking bowls of steaming food. She licked her lips in excitement as she sat down on one of the stools pushed up against the counter. Emeyla pushed behind her to join the table. Deanne knew she at least had to have missed her mother's cooking. Her mother was also sitting at the table looking anxiously excited. At least it is good to have Emeyla back so mother has an excuse to break out the fancy spices.

"How are you doing mother?" Deanne asked while she waited on her sister.

"It is nice having everyone around the house again," her mother admitted.

"Yeah, it is. It is good to be together as a family," Deanne suggested although she wasn't feeling entirely happy with Emeyla. It was good to have her home. To have the family together again. Her sister could be tough to live with but it was nowhere near as exciting when she was not around the house.

It was also good to see mother in high spirits. She had not looked this happy in over a month. She seemed sprightly even as she ladled out the Pusan into several small bowls. Deanne knew she missed her father very much and Emeyla shared a lot of the same features. It was probably good for her to look upon her and have something of father's face. Deanne stretched out a hand and laid it upon her mother's.

"It's going to be alright," Deanne insisted, "we'll get through this together."

"I worry a lot about you two," her mother started, "with Simun gone I know the work has been hard."

"It is, but I'm glad I can do my part to keep things going, Emeyla will too once she's recovered.

Maybe you could talk to her, maybe she needs a mother's touch,"

"Maybe", her mother began but was interrupted as Emeyla entered the room.

Emeyla frowned at Deanne, "You could have told me the font was frozen again."

"It does that nearly every year. You should have remembered that. Or maybe if you'd sent back a letter-"

"Girls," their mother interrupted with a stern glare.

"Sorry mother," they both said in unison. They exchanged annoyed glances before holding hands. The evening chant hadn't been the same without Emeyla there. They sang the well ingrained words the Firstborn taught from childhood.

“Syng pyve, syng ceam, syng blass. Pyve os wyh avel.”

Song protect, Song provide, Song guide. Protect us from harm. Deanne shot her sister a warning glance as they finished up the chant. She personally wasn't sure if she believed in the religion but it warmed her mother's heart so she always followed along diligently. Despite the Firstborns' worship of the Song, as long as you paid their taxes many didn't care so much about what you actually believed. As the old saying went, all gods lead back to the truth, and the Song is truth. So in their mind everyone was a believer whether they wanted to be or not. Deanne wasn't sure if she could really have confidence in that philosophy herself.

She did have full confidence in the deliciousness of her mother's bowl of steaming Pusan though. The crunchy greens and greasy, flavorful tender chunks of momot meat came together perfectly with the creamy broth of the dish. She grabbed a buttery biscuit, and filled her mouth with delicious chunks.

“How's the work coming along?” her sister asked.

“Well we had a snowstorm last week that really messed with the gears on a few collectors. Those things are fragile if you don't...”

“Well I'm sure you'll get it handled. I've been having all sorts of adventures. I've been to so many Circles and seen so many fascinating things. That reminds me, when I was in the Weeping Circle I ran into Sylv. Told her I'd talk to you about importing her keys again.” Emeyla interjected over Deanne.

“How many times I have I told her, father had a consistent relationship with the Enixophos Company and I see no ne-”

“Any good stories Emeyla? I’m sure a few interesting things happened while you were out on deliveries,” Vincen interjected. He mouthed to Deanne, I don’t want you two starting another fight. Deanne groaned into silence. He was probably right anyways. Whatever promises Emeyla had made she’d sort out later.

“Well... I did have a rather entertaining experience when I was in the Cerulean circle. After I made my delivery to Stonebreaker I went to the local tavern. Met a pair of yenneck who challenged me to a drinking contest...”

Emeyla was starting to get into story mode. As much as she had missed her sister Deanne was still too annoyed to pay much attention. She zoned out rather than trying to interrupt the duo. Sino had the right idea, sleeping in the corner by the warm fire. Deanne was glad the fire was still going.

She glanced around. There were still a few projects that could be done around the shop, the old crank on the worn register could use replacing. She probably should organize the shelves of merchandise but Emeyla had always liked doing that, maybe she could recruit her for that project. Next sufficient sale they had they’d have to replace the chipped pane near the bottom of the store window, it was letting too much cold air in. Alright, Deanne focus, she tried to bring her focus back to supertime. Deanne had to remind herself to relax and just enjoy the

moments with her family. But somebody has to take care of maintaining the family since her sister wouldn't.

"and then he asks, "ever seen a Firstborn try to swim? It's hilarious" and proceeds to pour his beer over the Firstborn Singer. Silence, the way she shrieked..." Emeyla was getting a little carried away laughing at herself.

"That's the funniest story I've heard in a long time," Vincen interjected laughing as well. Deanne noticed it seemed forced but couldn't tell if Emeyla was buying it or not.

Emeyla shot Deanne a smug grin, "There's an even funnier story about Deanne as a child. Do you remember when you decided to try fireberries for the first time?"

"Hey, hey, I thought we agreed to never bring that up again. No you really want to hear a good story Vincen, I can tell you a great story about the time that Emeyla tried to ride a naiyn thinking it was just a mount like a gremleck. Oh did father have a time sorting that one out."

"Sorry to interrupt dear, but I have a special surprise to celebrate Emeyla's coming home. You can finish your story over dessert." Mother interrupted. Oh its good we can still enjoy each other's company, Deanne thought to herself. This is what she had missed in Emeyla's absence.

Vincen's and Emeyla's attention were both decidedly gone with the mention of dessert.

Deanne's family hadn't had much money to spend on desserts lately and Emeyla wouldn't have had much on the road. Not with all the delays in deliveries, and not to mention the fines from Emeyla's expired visa. Deanne watched carefully as her mother bent behind the counter to pull

out a delicious smelling golden frosted cake. She recognized the frosting, that was a Daario cake. Absolutely delicious but, we don't have the money in our budget for that kind of cake, she thought even as her mouth salivated. Maybe mother had called in a favor? She really hoped it wasn't Vincen's doing. She'd told Vincen to stop loaning them money and things. She'd have to talk to him again.

"Vincen, can I talk to you for a minute?" Deanne asked quietly across the counter. Her mother gave a little sigh. Vincen shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Then he gave a wink to her mother. They got up and headed into the other room. As soon as they were behind the heavy wooden door Deanne started pacing in front of the fire.

"Vincen, I know you mean well but please tell me you didn't buy that cake," Deanne said both concerned and annoyed.

"Trust me, we all deserve that kind of pleasure after the last few days. It's as much for me as it is for you two. You love Daario's cakes, what's to complain about?"

"What I'm complaining about is that you've been showering me with gifts lately. Chocolates earlier this week, cake today. Covering our fines. Be straight with me, what's this about? I know you have more money than me but I can handle my own affairs."

"I know you can handle your own affairs. You're an incredibly capable woman Deanne. However, this isn't the right time for this conversation. Can't we talk about this another time?" Vincen argued.

"I'm just worrying. Look, I know you care about us, but we can handle ourselves. Okay? I can't keep accepting things from you. I *need* to provide for my family first. I promise, if I ever need any money I'll come to you. But please, not any more unless I ask."

"I'm...I'm just happy to have you all back together. I'd never mean to step on your independence. I just want to help you...and your family."

"You could have done that by buying some sweetberries or peachroot jam, that cake must have cost a small fortune. Maybe that's why Emeyla doesn't like you, she thinks you're trying to buy our loyalty?" Deanne hissed surprising even herself.

"That's not what I'm doing. You know that..." Vincen trailed off clenching his fists.

They must have raised their voices because her mother barged into the room. Great, this was about to become a whole family affair. This was going to get unnecessarily heated, and she wasn't thinking of the roaring fireplace. Her mother was the first to interject, her voice wavering as she tried to shout some reason into the room.

"Vincen, leave my sister alone. You heard her." Emeyla interjected as she crashed into the room. Her eyes fixed upon Vincen with a look of disgust. Vincen growled, his eyes flicking back to Deanne's own.

"You're no better," Deanne snapped turning on her sister, "Running off on me like that,"

"Well at least I'm not the Firstborn's whore," Emeyla spat staring Vincen in the eye.

Vincen twitched but stood his ground. Instead he kept focused on Deanne. Deanne stood feeling a fire stirring in her gut. Her feet shuffled upon the stone floor of the house as she turned upon her sister.

“Say that again?”

“I said he’s the Firstborn’s whore, did he even tell you how he found me? What he nearly did?”

“I saved your life,” he snarled.

“It was your fault it was in danger in the first place!”

“Silence,” she meant it as both a curse and literally. Deanne slinked away towards the fireplace. The logs were starting to turn into ash, it was mostly smoke by this point. Deanne bent down to put a few more logs on the fire. She couldn’t deal with this-not any of this right now. This was supposed to be a quiet evening.

“Vincen, go home. Emeyla go to bed, I’ve got orders to catch up on,” Deanne gave a weighty sigh. Might as well, this had been a terrible idea.

“Deanne-” Vincen protested.

“I’m going out to the workshop,” She could see neither of them were done speaking but she went ahead and grabbed her coat and gloves anyways. She grabbed her hat too, a heavily patched flat cap, just to help with resisting the snowflakes. The cap didn’t make much difference. Snow would still be all over her long braids when she got back in though. Deanne pulled on her songweaver to complete the ensemble. She needed to get away.

She marched out through the back door and trudged through the snow. After she reached the workshop she grabbed her gauntlet and switched a lever upon a collector. Deanne opened the flow and listened to the Song as it rushed into the room. The rhythm was familiar beating in her ears. Within her hand she formed a chisel. As she worked towards engraving a recent order she let herself fade away, to be absorbed in the Song.

Deanne tried to ignore her mother as she crept into her workshop. She was not sure how long it had been. Deanne had been lost in the Song. She looked up at her mother. Her mother gave her a worn sigh.

“Deanne, do you ever stop working?”

“I’ve got backed up orders I need to finish, mother. This isn’t the time.”

“When is the time then? You blame your sister for being reckless then you spend the night out here working instead of sleeping. You’ll work yourself to death the way you keep at it.”

“Well then I’ll work myself to death taking care of the family. In case you noticed I seem to be the only one.” Deanne instantly regretted the words.

“I mourn Simun’s death too. In my own way. The Song soothes you know that, that’s why you spend all of your time out here in the workshop. I was not as lucky as you. My parents were poor most of their lives. They never had the money to send me off to a craftsman. I’m lucky I caught your father’s eye or else I would have been rinless all my life. You’ve been blessed with a craft and I understand wanting to use it. Don’t push everyone away though.”

"I'm not pushing you away. At least, I don't mean to. I'm just trying to keep ends together. The Firstborn say duty is important, family is important, I'm trying to do my duty for my family."

"That's what your father said too when he left. I have to go, this is the chance of a lifetime. He was absorbed in the Songcraft too. Don't push me away because of yours. Don't push away Vincen either, you know why he's doing so much for you. Look to your sister and realize such things are fleeting." Her mother finished and left the workshop.

Deanne struggled to keep her thoughts together. She knew that it was difficult for all of them. Deanne was just trying to do her part. She also knew that Vincen did care about her. She just was not sure she had the time for such things. It was tough enough trying to focus her attention on one thing much less than two. Groggy, she finally decided she couldn't manage to focus anymore this evening, instead she would head in for the night.

Several mornings later after her sister's legs were further healed her mother decided it was time to fix the glass pane and pay off the last of their taxes for the month. They would be dipping into their savings, but it would be worth it to save heating costs in this continuing snow storm. Deanne yawned as she followed her sister down the snow covered road towards the main street of Stonesbroke. The white speckled street wove its way down the mountain through a few carefully curated acres of wood. Deanne knew once she had crossed the bridge across the river they were nearing the main of town. It was one thing if Emeyla wanted to dash ahead, but someone had to stay near Sino and his sled for their purchases.

“Keep up the pace, See, there it is right at the bottom of the hill. We’re nearly there.” Deanne encouraged her dog to continue forward. She could easily spot his reddish coat popping out just above the snow. At least the snow had melted a little over the last few days, it would have been impossible to have Sino make this trip back when the snow was halfway up her own leg. This was getting ridiculous.

It was a good view of Stonesbroke from this side of the valley. They could see the whole town from up here. A rather large town attractive to scholars from all over, it was bustling with life even in the heavy winter snow. Many came to observe the night sky in the observatory built upon the mountain. The Firstborn’s crowning accomplishment in Stonesbroke. Sprawling shops strewn across the valley stretched below the enormous path to the Temple Embassy. Houses of all different materials and shapes dotted the landscape, some tall and huge, others small and skinny, the only thing most of them had in common was that they were all currently covered with snow and belching out stacks of smoke. She took a moment to enjoy the sight as she ruffled Sino’s fur with her palms.

“Could you use a ride missy?” Deanne heard from behind her where on the other side of the road a cabbie was approaching.

“No thanks sir,” she replied, “Good luck with your rounds today though.”

“Ah suit yourself then,” the cab driver, cracked a whip into the air above his gremleck signaling them to move forward. You’d sometimes see horses in the summers, but during the winter only the thick furred gremlecks could survive the cold and ice. They were reminiscent of the

mountain bears in stature, although they had horns upon their heads. It was their stone gray coats that gave them their name. Deanne couldn't afford one of the cabbies today though, money would be tight enough moving forward. Now that she had insisted she wasn't taking any more gifts from Vincen. At least the monetary kind.

Eventually Deanne made her way down the hill and near the edge of town. She spotted Emeyla sitting under the overhang of a cabbie station. Sino barked as he tugged his sled to a stop outside the stable and started slobbering over a nearby icicle. Deanne walked over careful not to bump into any of the bustling folk starting to fill up the streets.

"How did you get here so quickly? I was worried when I didn't see you on the road," she asked curious.

"I met a nice cabbie, desperate for coin. Gave me half-price. I don't think my legs have quite recovered yet so I didn't want to strain them the whole way down the hill." Emeyla answered. Deanne was about to say something about the cost but caught herself. Instead she just rolled her eyes and brushed some snow off her coat.

"Well we wouldn't want to strain them again. Let's go to the glassmakers, then we can stop by the temple embassy pay our taxes and finish with a cheap lunch."

"Wouldn't it be easier to split up, I could hit the temple while you hit the glassmakers?" Emeyla implored.

She's just been recovered; I wasn't planning on letting her out of my sight anytime soon.

Deanne sighed, "I was hoping to spend the day together,"

"I'll be fine," Emeyla wagged a bare hand in front of her face, "We can spend the afternoon together after I've paid the taxes. It's the least I can do to make things up a bit."

Deanne gritted her teeth, "Fine, I can't force you to come with me. I'm not trusting you with a full purse though, you'll get the tax money and that's it. It better all make it to the temple or I'll have your head. Meet me at Grylluchu's tavern by noon at the latest."

"You've been watching me like a hawk since I got home. You sound like you could use a drink to loosen up a bit. I'll stop by the temple then meet you there. See you shortly Deanne." Emeyla replied. She gave Sino a good bye belly rub and they both started off their separate ways. I know Emeyla's older than me, Deanne thought, but she acts like a child. It is a terrible idea to let her off on her own.

Vincen Cartier:

The Rookery was the oldest gentleman house in Stonesbroke. Its wooden trim, multiple chimneys and symmetrical multi-paned windows read of new money. It was also one of the tallest buildings in the area due to its owner, Falcon. Vincen Cartier's father had been forced to pay for its re-construction by the Firstborn after its first iteration was burnt down by some of his drunken workers. It stood as a visible reminder, even for the wealthiest family in the region, the Firstborn still had power over them. Vincen could see his contact through the windows near the counter of the bar.

Yaenne, more commonly known as the more pronounceable Falcon, was an intimidating man. An actual giant from the Circle of Mists, he was always several heads taller than anyone else in the room. His towering top hat made him seem even more gigantic. He was usually found leaning slightly on a tall, immensely thick, hickory cane, painted black with a carved wooden falcon at its tip. Vincen had become quick partners with Falcon of late. A man of his talents had been useful in quelling the initial rumors and dissenters that had surrounded the Forgotten Circle. In a discreet manner of course.

Vincen had been making more deals with him than he would have liked. He was a powerful man carrying a lot of influence in not just Stonesbroke but several circles. That didn't mean he had to particularly like the man though. If he was going to get away with crossing the Firstborn though he would need the help of someone with that kind of weight to throw around.

"You got the money, let's go in and get it done already."

That'd be Madsen, Vincen's recently procured bodyguard. He had decided it would be helpful to have additional protection if the Hunters came after him. According to his sources Madsen was the best in the business. The creature certainly looked terrifying enough, even more so when he smiled. His wolfish face filed into sharp edges near the mouth and his horns were decorated with poison tipped spikes. He towered over Vincen, his sheer size could probably rival Falcon himself. Madsen's face had cracked into an odd smile. When his jaw opened up revealing the incisor filled mouth it just caused an involuntary reaction. Vincen shuddered.

"Madsen, don't ever smile again."

“Whatever you say boss.”

Carefully he approached the doorway. The man at the door raised an eyebrow as he recognized him.

“Falcon’s expecting me,” he stated.

The crisp morning wind blew away the man’s words as he beckoned him through the door.

Inside the leather bound chairs and maroon walls gave a warmer feel to the establishment than what was seen from outside. A few patrons around the room gave odd glances at Cartier as he entered the room. I hope Falcon’s worth the money. I’m counting on this. His heart dropped into his stomach.

“Falcon’s busy with a customer in the back, mind a round of cards while we wait upon him?”

“Might as well. It’d be your loss,” Vincen acquiesced, “Madsen care to join?”

Madsen growled and joined the table. The table was illuminated by dancing blue lights. As much as his eye was on the game he tried to keep an eye on the room as well. A round later there was significantly more coin in his pockets. What’s taking Falcon so long? Worry returned into his mind Cartier set his cards down on the table. He’d learned to play the game well. He rolled the die as it was his turn, it showed a seven. Even though he enjoyed the card game, Vincen wanted this business concluded quickly. He wondered what was taking so long as he exchanged his mouse card for a crown card. He was two cards away from winning.

Falcon finally emerged from the back as a nearby stringed quartet began to play a lively melody he hadn't heard before. As he made his way over to the table Falcon towered over Cartier. His finely brown striped vest over his tight collared shirt was freshly splattered with crimson blood. It worked as an effective reminder that Falcon kept his hands dirty.

"Falcon, I'll be right there. Cheers men," Cartier said as he stood up from the table. The men instead scattered hurriedly leaving a place for Falcon to conduct his dealings.

"Were you able to find any more?" Vincen asked.

"They're curious things, but I have all my men could lay their hands upon." Falcon responded in softly spoken tone at odds with his physique. He leaned upon the table, which squeaked, and beckoned for Vincen to come closer. In an even quieter voice, practically a whisper, as Vincen walked closer.

"I have something else that might be of interest to you as well. Not here though, I don't trust these hired men with such a sensitive subject."

"I am intrigued, but I have an obligation at the Firstborn Temple Embassy shortly" Vincen gestured towards the chest Madsen carried, "Your payment."

Falcon grinned his creased face barely hiding its lust. Falcon pulled out a bag and opened it, showing a small mound of glittering pearly silver keys. Vincen felt sick at the sight of them. Though better they were in his possession than anyone else's. He didn't need any more

mistakes happening like upon the island. The Firstborn would want them at once if they knew there were others that still existed.

“Now about this business at the Temple Embassy,” Falcon brandished his cane as they planned their next meeting.

Emeyla:

Stonesbroke had a delightful quaintness to it in the winter. Emeyla was glad to be back in the town, to be alone adventuring onto the streets. I wonder how Elpen’s doing, her sister’s old engraving partner. He often reminded her of her father. They had grown up together after all. Perhaps she could stop by and visit him while she was in town. Emeyla focused further as she entered the crowds, it was busy today and she didn’t want to get jostled around.

The closer Emeyla got to the market square the more right she was. Even with all the snow and ice peoples of all shapes and sizes were out in the shops today. The majority were humans of course, but there were plenty of barwin this time of year. They always reminded her of oversized ducks. The funny looking creatures stood out clumsily stumbling around upon their webbed feet, covered in thick winter coats. She noticed a particular pair of well-dressed necca, their huge furry ears and sandy fox shaped snouts standing out above their sharply tailored waistcoats. They carried umbrellas and were heading towards the storefront that read clearly Stonesbroke Tailoring Company. That was one of the oldest local companies in town. It was incredible thinking about how many scholars came here each year to enjoy the winter constellations and the town’s diverse storefronts.

Emeyla made her way deeper into the square even as she was still enamored with the stores. She was glad to be back. The place was simply magical in the winter. She had to hold back as she passed by Col's Cold Confectionaries, boasting flavored ices and chilled creams through its store windows. They sounded delicious even at this time of year. Next door was Elpen's Gauntlet and Assorted Engravings, the engraver she had just been thinking about. She could see shiny brass and sleek gem encrusted songweavers through the frost caked windows. Glimmering engraved collectors were displayed nearby and other navigator gear. Elpen must have expanded his business this year, good for him. Though it would mean more competition for their goods.

Emeyla stopped by to look into Klaww's Exotic Animal Establishment and see the three eyed squirrels again. Emeyla had to restrain herself from gasping in surprise as a giant walked up to the window, towering over herself, at least a dozen feet tall. The giant tipped his hat as he hunched over and made his way into the store. Emeyla had to chuckle a little bit as snow sloshed off of his hat onto a few members of the gathered crowd. Past Klaww's was a herd of cabbie's all calling out for customers to join them on rides to all the hopping destinations in Stonesbroke and surrounding towns. Pushing through the crowd they managed to make their way across the snow laden streets towards the path towards the Firstborn temple embassy.

Now it was time to go up the hillside to get to the Firstborn temple but even in the winter it was stunning under the bright sunshine. It was quite the trek to get up the mountainside in the snow. The usual black granite statues that led the path were covered in shimmering white snow. Emeyla's heart skipped slightly as she finally neared the great marble doors. They folded

back with crackling blue misty Song snapping from the stones. The constant singing of the temple was a given. The Eternal Door was at the center where it sang every hour of the day flooding the music all across the mountainside.

Upon entering the temple main a wall of warmth fell upon Emeyla. It was as if heat was pumping straight through the stones that lit the hallway. Deanne might have some notion of how it worked. She'd never asked though. Accompanied by the heat was the background sound of the Song. Without the heat the temple would be even more freezing than the blizzard winds, so she was thankful regardless. The Song reverberated throughout the temple, a constant humming beneath the chattering of the crowd.

"It'd be great to have this kind of heat at home wouldn't it?" She commented to herself as she shed her coat.

Plenty of other people were here in the hall of all different races, many coming from the embassy, where the Doorhouses were located. That was how most merchants, tourists, and casual travelers went between circles, how she originally meant to go home. She wore a guilty smile as she thought about her own experience in creating her own doors between circles recently. She made her way towards the center of the temple listening to the rising pitch of the Song. Emeyla glanced up at the Firstborn's stained glass skylights. It must have been another piece of Firstborn Songcraft that they weren't all covered with snow. Instead they lit a colorful path forward towards the Eternal Door.

Emeyla didn't need to necessarily reach the Eternal Door itself. She could see a faint glow even from the hallway. She wondered if it actually led anywhere. She didn't think anyone other than the Firstborn would have known though. It was a beautiful sight to behold, like a great storm of ever burning silvery blue fire. Around the Eternal Door white-winged Firstborn kyrsktr, (the priesthood) swooped around like friendly snowfalls. They were the gentler arm of the Firstborn preaching their religion and tending to the nest. This was the way the Firstborn allowed to be seen rather than the ruthless bankers and benefactors that ran things mostly unseen. Many of the kyrsk carried barrels of drink or soup for travelers which their acolytes would help them distribute. This was how it was every winter, the temple being a respite for travelers and the impoverished alike. Emeyla moved past them towards the charity room, or more aptly named by the locals, the tax pit.

She heard a swoosh of wings and a familiar old bird landed behind her.

"Singer Aenna," Emeyla exclaimed. Emeyla threw her arms around Aenna's neck.

"Emeyla, so good to see you back in town and well again. We were chanting for your return and then healing once we heard of your injuries. It'd be a shame to lose another of our nest so young. This valley has seen so much pain already. We have comforted many here over the past year, you should come to one of our grieving meetings. We hold them every fifth day." Aenna's acolyte translated for her.

Emeyla knew a little bit of the Firstborn language, but not much. The temple embassy was used as a school to train youth and the tongue was required learning. However, it was nearly

impossible to translate to a more common tongue accurately. Humans couldn't make many of the noises, and any attempt to write the language usually ended up deducing different dialects depending on how one decided to interpret the screeches. The acolytes were the talented who were specially picked by the Firstborn for their talents in translation. It was the best way to communicate with the Firstborn Singers.

"Thank you Singer Aenna, your chants were most welcome," Emeyla replied with a nod to acknowledge the acolyte translator.

"I see your mother here often. She missed you terribly while you were gone."

"Yeah." Emeyla stumbled over the word. She didn't want to talk about her mother right now. "I should get back to my sister; she'll be missing me."

"At least it is good you have recovered so quickly. I know the loss of your friends and family still grieves you. Give your mother my best and may the Syng guide you. Unfortunately, I am busy as well today. I'm entertaining a visitor from the Golden Circle today. I would love to catch up more at a better opportunity." Singer Aenna bowed her head slightly and Emeyla withdrew to return the same. Emeyla followed her flight as she flew her way over to a black cloaked acolyte. A Prevailer, here? What was he doing here? Usually they were back in the Golden Circle attending to the Benefactors.

"I wonder what a Prevailer from the Golden Circle is doing all the way out here," she muttered to herself.

Her mind awhirl Emeyla's mind was working overtime. Her curiosity got the better of her and she followed the strange acolyte at a distance. Then she noticed something weird as the crowd split for a moment. The Prevailer was meeting up with Vincen Cartier. She'd recognize his figure anywhere. What's he doing chatting with a Prevailer? This has to do with our encounter in the Circle of Isles. He had split now; he was heading towards the exit. Maybe she could catch him and eavesdrop, find out something useful. She headed towards the marble doors carefully trying to keep her distance. Impatiently she tapped her foot on the stones. She thought she felt something brush up against her. Glancing to her side she instead noticed as Cartier slipped by her.

"Hey, Vincen," she tried to catch his attention as the stone door finished opening up. He was obviously startled and scurried through the entrance as fast as he could. Emeyla tried to yell out after him as he pushed his way further outside the temple. Then she noticed what she thought might be why he had avoided her. He met up with a giant she'd seen somewhere before, and a towering beast of a creature beside him. Who were they? Where were they going?

This seemed highly suspicious. Emeyla stopped trying to get his attention. Maybe if she followed him she might find some proof for Deanne that Cartier was no good after all. After their encounter she had been suspecting there was definitely something off about him. If it was nothing she could just backtrack and meet Deanne at Grylucchu's. The crowd was dense and the snow slippery. Emeyla cautiously weaved through a group of gossiping ladies before having to hop a bench. The group was desperately trying to avoid anyone following them. Even more

curious. She forced herself to stop for a moment she whirled around a lamppost and headed across the square trying to keep an eye on the group. She thought she'd lost them but she saw them round the edge of a baker's cart.

Emeyla was right, she caught a glance of the little group on the edge of the temple square. He turned the corner onto another street and she followed him. Practiced breaths helped her keep pace despite the prolonged detours. The group took a staircase up the side of one of the more unfamiliar buildings. Steeling her nerves, she scurried to find a decent eavesdropping spot.

A cold winter breeze blew upon her and she gritted her teeth. From her place underneath an overhang she caught a few words.

"I don't understand why you insisted we meet up with him first," that was Cartier.

"You were asking about Forgotten Circle artifacts," yes, she knew it!

"This one says has something even better than keys," that must have been the unknown giant.

"Now I don't want this getting out of course but..." the voice faded out for a moment as the wind picked up. As it died down she heard a bit more, "Diagrams, engravings, the notebook is incredible. Simon sent it by Songpost directly to me, didn't want it getting in the wrong hands. Of course I gave it to his daughter, after the loss. I'm surprised she didn't tell you if you're so interested..."

The wind picked up making it difficult to make out all of the new voice. It was one she recognized though. That was Elpen, Deanne's old engraving partner. This was too many things to be a coincidence.

"I'll have to retrieve it...it's too dangerous in the wrong hands. One last thing, most importantly..." Emeyla ground her fist into the wood as the wind blew away whatever Cartier was planning. Whatever it was sounded sketchy though. Emeyla kept her head hidden as Elpen and company scurried away down the staircase.

She was somewhere between feeling guilty and furious. Elpen had travelled to *the* expedition? Emeyla didn't know for certain it had been vague enough but her sister was keeping something from her. What had she kept from her? Maybe it would have helped. What was Cartier doing? This seemed terribly dangerous. Almost treasonous. It made sense Vincen would be making moves against the Firstborn after his betrayal in the Circle of Isles. She growled as she stomped out into the snow. This new revelation made her angrier at Cartier. If he'd trusted her maybe they could have worked together on things. Emeyla dragged her feet across the snowy street stones as she started off to go sulk for a while.

CHAPTER 7

DRINKING AND DECISIONS

Deanne:

Deanne had finished her tasks and been waiting for what seemed like ages for Emeyla to show up. Where was she? She looked around the tavern to see if she'd missed them. A bunch of other regulars were alternating with travelers, but none of them were her sister. She sipped on her cider as she waited. Emeyla would have to show up eventually. While she waited she glanced around the pub. A few of the chairs were on uneven legs, and the door hinges squeaked. Could probably use some more oil, and while Grylluchu was at it he could order more craymus, she was very disappointed her favorite craymus chowder was not currently available. Grylluchu ran the oldest tavern in town, and in her opinion the best. The Wolf's Den on the other side of town was a bit seedier and the Rookery up by the waterfall was a haven for thugs. She had no intentions of ever visiting that one.

She spotted Vincen enter and her mood improved considerably. He was wearing one of his signature crimson coats. She was starting to wonder if he ever wore anything that wasn't red. She noticed him and his new companion attempt to act nonchalant as he tried to act like he wasn't bee lining for her table. This was a creature she hadn't run across before. Taller than her with massive black furred arms and a face reminiscent of a wolf, though with peculiar curved horns. The tips appeared to have been layered with metal spikes. As he removed his crimson snow flaked hood the Vincen placed a hand on the table focusing her attention back upon him. "Waiting on anyone?"

"My sister," she rolled her eyes, "She should be showing up any moment now. What are you doing here?" Deanne replied. Vincen rolled his eyes. He pulled back his sleeve slightly to reveal the top of a thick black bag.

"I had some business in town and spotted Emeyla in the temple embassy. Figured if she was in town you probably were here too. Thought I'd sneak in here and ward off the cold with a drink. Mind if I join you? Madsen, buy us some drinks will you?" He slinked into the booth and waved a hand towards the behemoth. A few moments later the beast returned and dropped a mug of ale in front of Vincen. He bowed slightly and retreated to stand in a corner where he could scope out trouble.

"So who's tall, dark and scary for?" Deanne asked sarcastically.

Vincen rolled his eyes, "He's here to protect me," Vincen continued, "I'm trying to take some precautions. I'm already skating on thin ice with the Firstborn here."

"Yes of course," Deanne noted, "Just like how you made the necessary precaution of partnering with Falcon several months back. Do you ever stop taking precautions? If the Firstborn wanted you dead, you'd be dead already."

Vincen took a careful sip from his mug. Deanne knew she was probably one of the few people who could speak with him so frankly. She didn't know why she was antagonizing him, maybe some remnants from her annoyance from the other night. Her mind had been acting weirdly lately. She took a sip of her cider, hot and sweet down her throat. She glanced back at him and he was still smiling.

"You might not approve of my precautions but they're necessary. Maybe I could get rid of my connections to the underground...then the Firstborn would take over the market and then what happens the next time I need to go around them? I need the assets."

Deanne sighed, "I see your point as much as I despise it. Have you heard anything from your father lately? I know he's been distant of late."

"I don't even really know the man...he's still off in the Stardust Circle drinking his sorrows away or making connections depending on what you hear. I don't think he's ever planning on coming back here, and honestly I don't mind. Although I'll admit it's isolated and quiet up at the manor. I could use some company" Vincen answered with some emphasis upon the last words. Deanne felt a bit of a click. So that's what all the gifts had been about. Silence Vincen, he never did say anything straight did he?

"Shame, wish there was something I could do to help?" Perhaps she could get him to at least ask for her company properly.

"Actually I could use your help. I'm going to need an engraver who's willing to destroy some keys for me," Cartier gestured to a large pouch by his side.

"Are those...," Deanne asked distracted and a bit annoyed by the change in subject.

"Keys to the Forgotten circle. Hopefully unlike your sister you recognize the actual trouble we'd cause by attempting to use them. I want to destroy them, put this issue to rest finally." Vincen explained.

"I don't know, shouldn't this be something the Firstborn handle?" Deanne whispered, "I don't know."

"If you don't want to help that's fine. I'd never want to force you to do something you're uncomfortable with. I really don't want to make you uncomfortable at all. I feel terrible about the ruckus I caused the other night."

"Look tensions were high, it was just as much my fault. I should have waited until we were somewhere more private. I'm sorry," Deanne apologized.

"Then how about we change that up? I'd like to officially invite you to my estate for dinner. I'll explain what all the gifts are about, try to smooth things over." Vincen gave her a charmingly disarming grin. Finally, that was the kind of proper invitation.

Deanne smiled back heart bouncing in her chest, "That sounds like a wonderful idea, I'd love to."

"Great. Oh, maybe when you come to visit you could bring along an old notebook of your fathers? I heard he left something to you from the expedition and was really curious. Might help me gain some closure."

"Wow," Deanne uttered surprised, "Are you Vincen Cartier or someone else? Of course, anything to help you gain closure. It's just been collecting dust on my shelf."

"That would be--"

Vincen was interrupted by a frigid voice that had just entered the bar.

“What are *you* doing talking to *him*?” Emeyla had arrived, what imperfect timing. Way to ruin the moment. She sounded even more upset than she had been. She whirled upon Vincen looking furious.

Madsen growled with a ferocity Deanne had never heard from anything before. Men all over the tavern went for weapons as he made his way over. The bartender gave a nervous laugh. Even the irate Emeyla stopped clean in her tracks. For a moment she looked absolutely terrified at the behemoth growling at her.

“Woah Madsen! It’s okay, she’s not a threat.” Vincen got up and calmed down the great beast. He turned to the bartender and shoved a few silver nia onto the counter he was cowering under.

“Sorry about the scene,” he grumbled to the bartender. Then he turned back toward Deanne, “Let me know when you’re available for the dinner Deanne.” Vincen walked away from the table icily and Emeyla sat down. Her sister looked snowy and sweaty, with an annoyed frown on her face. Deanne sighed.

“Aren’t you a little old to act like this?” Deanne asked.

“Okay, maybe that was a little dramatic for all parties involved. But I don’t trust him. Did you know he’s making deals with the black market? Plus, that beast of his, terrifying. I’ll talk to him when I have to, no more.” Emeyla puffed. She stopped grabbed Deanne’s cider and slurped down half the contents before slamming it back down on the table.

“Yes I did know-hey, get your own cider.”

“Sorry, tired, long story, tell you later. First I wanted to ask you about Elpen.” Deanne was totally thrown for a loop with this turn in questioning.

“What?”

“Elpen. Has he approached you with any notebooks or anything of father’s? Has mom mentioned anything? I know you and her had an argument a few nights ago.”

First Vincen then Emeyla? What was in that old notebook? Granted at the moment she trusted Vincen more than her own sister. Deanne would have to think fast. However, she knew she was a terrible liar. She grabbed her mug off of the table, “I’m going to go get another drink. Then we can talk.”

She stood up from the padded seat ready to dash across the tavern towards the barkeep.

Emeyla wasn’t buying it. Emeyla grabbed her hand.

“You do know something. You were always awful at lying,”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Emeyla. You’re acting like a child. Elpen is a kind old necca who’s never done you any harm. Leave him be with his stories. You must be mistaken.”

“Deanne, don’t lecture me. I know Cartier is planning something, this is important.” Emeyla’s wild eyes looked like they were about to pop from their sockets.

Deanne sighed. She'd flipped through it, it had a few maps, a few notes but nothing she had particularly found dangerous. She'd already promised it to Vincen though. Her sister could get it afterwards. With the mood her sister was in she didn't think saying that would be the best course of action though. She sat back down at the table wringing her hands. The smell of the apple cider wasn't even appealing in the moment. She closed her eyes and took a breath.

"How about you ask Elpen? Maybe he'll know more about what you're talking about."

"Fine maybe I will," Emeyla replied haughtily. Emeyla's face cycled through various emotions, annoyance, disappointment, relief. Deanne just sat in the booth resigned. Her sister had been so overly emotional of late. Deanne completely understood the pain, but there were better ways to deal with it.

"Will it help me find father and Ravenna?"

"Father's dead," Deanne hissed annoyed, "Don't you think it doesn't bother me too? But I don't have the luxury to play pretend. Someone has to be responsible for the family, you and mother."

"Deanne."

"I've had enough of this. Chase all you want; I'm tired of dealing with this. It's clear you don't care about us anymore. Run off, if that's what you want so badly. I'm going home."

Deanne got up from her seat and paid her bill up at the counter. She untied Sino from his post at the pet's corner inside the tavern and then she was back on the street. For being over two

decades old Emeyla could still certainly act like a child sometimes. Deanne beckoned him to follow her and they made their way back across the square and towards the mountain towards the store. The streets were a little less crowded with most of the people taking time out of the cold for some lunch in warmly heated taverns. It was starting to get slightly warmer too in the bright sunshine of the day, at least she would have a clear path home.

The trek back uphill always took more of a strain than the descent. Even Sino was starting to get tired. Deanne took a moment to rest by a tree the thin leaves scratching at her coat. I hope mom's doing well back home. Having recovered her breath, she gave Sino a friendly head rub and they started back up the frozen slope.

Deanne was out in the workshop but she could hear the ruckus even separated by several walls. Emeyla was back, and she was yelling at their mother. She would like to say she was surprised. Instead she tried to focus on shaping a new crank for the broken cash register. Using her songweaver, she'd gone ahead and melted the metal. Now it was just going to be a matter of maintaining the melt temperature as she molded it into the right form. It felt good to work with the shimmering hammer in her hand, and the Song in her head. From the smell of warm metal, it was ready to be molded. Carefully she used her tools to begin molding the iron.

She was so focused it wasn't until the cold air blew all over her workspace that she realized the argument had moved into her workshop. Angrily she glared at both her mother and sister distracted as metal warped in her fists. Emeyla was still yelling at her mother, eyes filled with angry tears. Her mother instead was glaring back at her visibly annoyed and hands on her hips. Deanne lowered her gauntlet towards the anvil.

“What’s this about a notebook? Why is Emeyla so upset with you?”

“I actually didn-

“Those could have helped me find them, *he* would have given them to me!” Emeyla interrupted before she could finish her thought.

“I want to know about this notebook, why didn’t you tell me?” Mother retorted angrily.

“Quiet!” Deanne slammed her iridescent hammer into the anvil causing a shower of sparks. The two stopped quarreling for half a moment before they started back at it again. Deanne waited a moment, glanced at her brass covered hand and pointed it at both of them.

“I said, quiet!” Bolts of acrid Song shot out of the gauntlet towards them dashing down their throats. They both gasped trying to make sounds. The silence permeated the air as they both attempted to speak. Her mother’s glare was more than enough to chill to the bone but Deanne gave her one right back.

“Not in father’s workshop. You two want to argue go somewhere else but don’t involve me. I told you I’ve had enough of this. Both of you leave me alone, I’m working!” She pointed them back towards the door.

Her mother gave her a look which clearly said, we’ll talk about this later, and Emeyla was more than happy to continue making rude hand gestures at her. Neither them seemed like they wanted to move.

"You're letting all the cold air in. Now either leave or I'll levitate the both of you out." Deanne threatened. She stared at the gauge on her songweaver, she had enough energy to carry through with her threat. She was done with this. She'd had enough. Deanne stood her ground and the two reluctantly pushed back through the door. Mother shut it behind them leaving Deanne once again to her Syng and machines.

Deanne tried to get back to shaping the crank but she was distracted. Even though the workshop was her space she couldn't entirely focus on the machinery in front of her. She couldn't help but keep glancing down at her gauntlet. What would father think if he could see us arguing now? Deanne thought as she swung the hammer upon the molten metal. Why did he leave? He could have said no. He should have said no.

She should have burnt the notebook when Elpen first offered it. Deanne didn't know why she'd kept it. Keepsake maybe? Emeyla had claimed father's songweaver much to her frustration. Mother had her own memories. Maybe she should have given it to mother but she hadn't wanted to reopen old wounds. Mother was lost enough in her own thoughts without finding more things to worry about. Emeyla was her own mess.

She knew how tough it must have been to lose not only father but Emeyla's swornmate as well. It had torn her apart when it happened. They had been building a future together, Deane recognized that. But at some point you have to internalize, move on, that's what she kept telling herself. Unlike her sister she didn't have the luxury to stop and grieve. The work needed done. Deanne felt like she needed to do something differently though. Something had been off ever since Emeyla had arrived home from the deliveries.

I should destroy those keys like Vincen asked. At least it would put the matter to rest. Who cares what's on the other end of that Door? She swung the hammer again carefully tapping out some of the shape. I'll agree, when I meet him for dinner and talk to him. With a plan in her mind and a hammer in her hand Deanne forced herself to concentrate on her work again. Everything would sort itself out soon. It had to.

Emeyla:

Emeyla could see her own frozen breath. The ice beneath her feet gave off a chilling aura as she slid and glided around the icy river bend. Usually her escape from her problems had been by travelling Circles. Without her father's gauntlet she was stuck here, she didn't even have her deliveries. Without it she was stuck simply gliding around upon the frozen ice. She danced upon the river, across the calming sheet of white. In this place, in this moment, she felt closer to Ravenna again. Ravenna had been the one who taught her to skate. It had taken several weeks but it had been a wonderful experience. She took a moment to admire the trees, still green even in this frost. If only she could keep her composure as steadily as the trees. Though it did already feel like she was growing more short tempered ever since the incident in the Circle of Isles.

Emeyla glanced down at her arm. Although it was covered in thick sleeves and a furred glove it was good to know she was finally fully healed. It was late in the evening, but she had needed the time to herself. Perhaps her deeper wounds would heal with time. Still the thought of her father's notebook was tantalizing, though it boiled her blood she hadn't been made aware of it sooner. She'd already argued with both Deanne and her mother today, neither of them were

being very cooperative. She pirouetted, slowing to a stop. Her mind wasn't entirely on them though.

She also couldn't help but keep on thinking back to her encounter with Elpen earlier. What were they planning? He'd known her almost as long as he'd known Deanne. Maybe I can convince him to give me a look. For old time's sake, or perhaps for the right price. The old codger had always been a bit flexible when it came to money changing hands.

The storefront where Elpen lived was quiet by the point of evening Emeyla had arrived. Emeyla knocked upon his wooden door timidly. Her eyes flitted back and forth across the deserted street. It was dark enough most people didn't notice much beyond the scope of the lazily flickering lampposts they passed by. A moment passed and she knocked again at the door. After what seemed forever the door flew open and a familiar but not Elpen's poked her ginger snout through the door frame.

"Emeyla so good to see you! What are you doing here at this hour?"

"Atwar...good evening...I was wondering if..." Emeyla stuttered a little bit at the sight of Elpen's wife. She hesitated in how to approach Elpen about this notebook. She figured saying how she'd caught him talking with Vincen and Falcon would not be the right approach. She had to decide quickly as the freezing cold had begun to seep through her coat.

"Come on in dear, it's freezing out there." The old fox furred neccan stated rather warmly.

"I was wondering if I could talk to Elpen. I had a few questions for him."

“Elpen? He’s out drinking at the Wolf’s Den. If you’re going to see him maybe you can convince him to come home. I’m hearing a blizzard’s supposed to hit the town soon.” His wife sighed and after some thanks for the directions the door was once again closed.

Wolf’s Den? I didn’t know Elpen frequented there. Emeyla was determined to find out as she shifted her steps further into town. Pulling a scarf up around her neck she proceeded to make her way down the street. It wasn’t long until she reached the icicle encrusted sign of the Wolf’s Den. Pushing her way through the door she was greeted by a welcoming roaring fire.

The Wolf’s Den was quite a change from what she was used to. As she pushed open the heavy wooden door her nose was assaulted with alcohol, cheap perfume and stale urine. Elpen frequents this place, really? Making her way across the dark dank bar she waved over the barkeep.

“What can I get for you today, aherm?”

Emeyla tipped her hood hat up a little bit so the barkeep could see her face better. Winking she placed a rin on the table. She was pointed over to a table where a few different people were deeply engrossed into a raucous card game. Cluttered empty beer mugs filled the table and a thick cloud of smoke. Out from behind the smoke she noticed familiar white ears.

“Emeyla, I didn’t know you liked the Wolf’s Den,” Elpen called out from the corner. He pulled an extra chair up to the table, “join a round of ninety-six won’t you?”

Elpen's grubby palms put in a few coins. He yelled hoarsely at the waiter to run into the back and grab her something. The poor boy ran into the back as the barkeep, apparently called, Herschel pulled out two dirty mugs. They clanked onto the musty wooden table. Obviously he comes for the quality service, she chuckled.

As she drank some of the amber liquid Elpen took the second mug to himself. Emeyla's throat burned with heat. She noticed a pile of silver and brass coins already in Elpen's corner of the table. The dealer slid her three cards, and Emeyla tossed another brass coin in the center of the table. Might as well try to loosen him up. There was a collection of starting brass already in the center. Elpen gave her an encouraging wink as she picked up her cards.

"Feeling better about your father yet?"

"Is this really appropriate talk for a card table with strangers?"

"What better time to work it out than over drinks, a smoke and some cards? Blaine over here lost his wife during the expedition, and Hart lost his brothers so we all know that loss here. As much as the Firstborn would like to forget, none of us can."

"I suppose I can't argue with that reasoning,"

Emeyla glanced at her cards, a unicorn, a mouse and a falcon. Talk about scraping the bottom of the barrel. Might as well use the card game as a gateway.

"So you worked with my father for years, did he hire you to do any work on the expedition?"

Elpen rolled the brown wooden die. It was a seven.

“Drat, nineteen. A few odds and ends, helped with the engravings, did some collector maintenance on this end. Your sister helped on a lot of those as well.”

“Yeah, do you ever feel guilty about what happened? Like you wish you could have done something?”

“Nothing I could have done, but I do miss them. Many of them were good friends.” Elpen enunciated, “We’ve all lost friends and family to the monstrosity. Take Hart for example, mind sharing your story lad?”

She rolled the die herself. It was a crummy five. Emeyla tried to hide her disappointment as the satyr at the far side of the table jumped into the conversation.

“I had four older brothers that all died in the expedition. My hometown, Ruyster, was nearly a ghost town with all of the men they recruited from there. My younger brother Norman used to send Songpost home with supply caravans. His letters stopped coming about a week before the survivors made it home. I blamed myself, felt I should have kept him from volunteering, but he was so proud to be serving such a proud purpose. Made me confront my mortality, that’s why I’m going to live well in the time I have left.”

The satyr spread his cards down on the table. Three ravens, Emeyla rolled her eyes laying her own measly hand on the splintering table. Reaching across the table Hart scooped all of the brass bits as he chuckled.

“Thanks for your contribution to that well-living.”

Elpen frowned.

“How-I-I had a weighted die!”

They all laughed while he looked confused. Blaine twisted a weighted die between his fingers.

“You mean this one? Remember what I said about cheating old man?”

Tomas gave a shy smile. Hart raised a mug of ale in a salute. “I’ll give you that one,” Elpen allowed, “Tomorrow night though I’ll win it back in the next round.” Emeyla rose her cup to him as well. This had been the most fun she had had in a while.

“Till tomorrow night then boys, Elpen, Blaine, rest of you, I’m going to tuck in for the night. Nice to meet you Emeyla, join our card table any night. I’m exhausted,” Hart heartily shook her hand as he got up to leave. Elpen would want to leave soon, if she wanted to ask the window of opportunity would be closing soon.

“Elpen, I heard you recently had something of my father’s,”

Elpen raised an eyebrow and took another swig from his mug, “I’m more curious why your sister never told you about the notebook. Why do you think that is?”

Elpen’s easy admission threw Emeyla’s mind for a loop. She hadn’t said anything about a notebook. Her heart pounded in her chest, was he playing her further? Had he noticed her earlier? She took a deep breath of the smoky tavern air before she tried differently.

“So you *do* have something of my father’s? A notebook? Could I see it? It might help me gain some closure.”

Elpen groaned. His furry ears wiggled while he leaned forward out of his chair. Elpen went to have a drink from a nearby mug. Emeyla was growing impatient. Elpen continued to sip away anyways.

“The journal’s just a memento. Its sentimental, I wouldn’t have a problem with giving it to you. Goodness knows you need something to remember your father by. This obsession of yours isn’t healthy Emeyla.”

“So then,” Emeyla paused catching her breath, “you’ll let me look at it? I’m not planning anything.”

“Weren’t you paying attention,” Elpen rolled his eyes, “Your sister has it, ask her why she never brought it up with you” Elpen reluctantly sat up straight. He patted out a few creases in his shirt, “Sorry Emeyla, I wish I could help you, but first you’ve got help yourself.”

The old rascal stood up from the table. Emeyla grabbed the empty mugs. As they left a few neighboring drinkers got up to occupy the now vacant card table. There was more to this story. Why was this being kept such a secret?

The next morning before the sun came up Emeyla made her way into Deanne’s workshop. The workshop was an absolute mess. Metal shelves shoved sporadically into every corner, sheets of metal lying carelessly on the floor. A few of her sister’s collectors whirled absentmindedly from

their own carelessly scattered positions. How Deanne could ever find anything in this was a miracle, Emeyla thought to herself. She continued to rummage through the drawers trying to find the notebook. Short of tearing everything apart she was starting to get desperate. It wouldn't take too long before Deanne hid it somewhere else

At least she was in the dry workshop, the snowstorm was really starting to pick up outside. Emeyla continued to rummage through the drawers. She opened up one to find a bunch of random gears. The next contained bent sheets of metal. There had to be an easier way to do this. As she reached towards the next drawer Emeyla thought she heard footsteps.

"By the silence," she rushed to hide herself underneath a sheet of metal. It rustled slightly until she held it still. From the corner of her the sheet she could just see the familiar boots of her sister walk into the room.

"Have you seen Emeyla this morning? She was out late last night. I'm starting to worry she's planning something again." That was her mother's voice.

"No I haven't. Strangest thing though, Blaine stopped by the shop this morning on his way up to the manor for deliveries. Said he was with Emeyla at the Wolf's Den last night, gambling with Elpen." That was Deanne. She'd been so concentrated on Elpen spoiling her plans she hadn't considered his friends. Emeyla could feel her heart pounding in her chest as the footsteps grew closer.

"That's so unlike her," her mother said, "maybe she picked it up while she was travelling. I'm not sure if it's a worse or better way to deal with her grief."

"I'm not so sure it's just dealing with grief," Deanne interjected, "she was gone nearly all night last night. She straight up was ready to strangle Vincen at Grylluchu's yesterday. I think she's not well. Maybe you could try talking to her, she doesn't listen to me. Or we should call in another esoteric, maybe a soul specialist from the Cerulean circle?"

"I don't think that will be necessary. You were right the other night. I should have talked to her." that was her mother again, "She's always been a handful, I wish she would talk to me. I miss Simun just as much as she does."

"She's a grown woman mother. Emeyla has her own path. If it makes you feel better Vincen found the last keys floating around. I'm going to help him destroy them. Then we can finally put this nasty business to bed." Emeyla clenched her fists from underneath the table. Vincen had kept the keys himself? It made perfect sense. He must have tracked down the stranger for just that purpose. Trying to hoard them all to himself. But why did he want them destroyed so badly?

"You shouldn't have let her run off in the first place," her mother's voice said to Deanne.

"She got under my skin," Deanne admitted, "I know I shouldn't have run off like that."

"You two have more in common than you'd like to admit. You just need to try to remember that."

"It would help if she actually pitched in every once and a while. I can't do deliveries, man the counter and work on orders at the same time. Speaking of those orders, I'll help you look a little

longer but then I've got to get to work." Emeyla waited for the two pairs of boots to leave the room. She waited an extra moment then stepped out from underneath the sheet.

"With dad's journal *and* the keys I could find out what happened to them for certain," she said to herself as she continued to rummage through the drawers. She'd have to find the journal quickly before her sister got suspicious. Her thoughts trailed to her mother though...it was clear she cared. It was clear they both cared. But when I get back with news of father she'll forgive me. She misses him as much as I do. Still nothing, Emeyla thought while bent over near a drawer. She glanced up at the bookshelf. No, it wouldn't be that simple. She passed her hands upon the books. One had a different binding from the others. Emeyla hurriedly pulled it out. She opened it up and glanced at it. That was her father's writing, she flipped through it. There were journal entries, maps, it seemed to be what was looking for. She placed it into the inner pocket of her coat.

"Of course it'd be just like Deanne to have something in the most obvious place," she muttered to herself. It wouldn't be as easy getting the keys from Cartier though, especially with his new henchdog. But he did know they were going to be distracted tonight, after all this was Cartier's big dinner with Deanne. Emeyla carefully edged her way back outside of the workshop into the growing snowstorm. Still there would be the problem of getting into the manor in the first place. Then she saw it, the solution. A glimmering and glistening wall of ice on the side of the hill behind the snow. It might just work. She'd have to do it, for Ravenna.

CHAPTER 8

LOVEMAKING AND LARCENY

Deanne:

Deanne busily brushed her hair. It took forever to brush out all the knots and tame the beast. She loved the look when she had the time though, usually she just put it up to work on the machines but tonight she would be wearing it down. She was sitting across from the fireplace on one of the stools borrowed from the storefront. Carefully she took the brush through her hair watching herself in the mirror to make sure she didn't miss any loose strands.

It was not as often that Deanne got the opportunity to spend an afternoon making herself look pretty. It was a similar type of joy she felt looking in the mirror at her painted and polished face to the joy of finishing a new machine. It was just a different way of creating something beautiful. She brushed her hand over the gentle fabric of the rich crimson of her dress. She thought she'd try being Vincen's favorite color for a change. The dress went down to just past her knees, being met by her good pair of boots.

"You look beautiful dear," her mother said from her position as she knitted in front of the fireplace.

That was the plan, Deanne thought as she arched her back to admire herself in the chipped mirror. Since she had accepted Vincen's invitation for dinner she wasn't going to miss an opportunity to look good. She knew he wouldn't. It would be nice to have some time to herself for a change, doing something she wanted. Talk about these advances he'd been making. It was

starting to make more sense since their conversation at the tavern. She wasn't sure where she wanted it to lead though. What was the right move here?

She heard a knock on the door. Mother got there first, and opened the door to a snow speckled cabbie. He cleared his throat and stated, "We better get going soon, the storm's really picking up out there."

"I'm just about ready," Deanne interrupted, "Just give me a moment to grab my coat and we can be on our way."

Deanne grabbed her mother's old fur coat off the coatrack. She generally only borrowed it for special occasions. Draping the fur coat over her neck she stepped outside with the coachman. For a second she had to push her head down as the snow rushed at her face. Then she was in the still chilly, but much less windy rattling seat of the carriage. The last time I was in a cab I was going to my father's funerary rites... was it the same one? It very well could have been, the Cartiers preferred to book a few specific carriages. Father had used to tell stories of his time beyond the Fledgling Circle, he'd claimed there were more nations and worlds than she could have ever imagined. He claimed there were realms beyond their own whose towns made Stonesbroke look like a few small pebbles. She did miss him terribly. He would have known what to do about Emeyla if he was in her place.

She glanced out the window of the carriage. Behind the frosty panes she could see the first stars of the evening. Unlike her sister she'd never been as interested in her father's traveling. Maybe that's why she picked up engraving gauntlets and collectors, it was an easy way to touch

and understand the same things that had been important to her father. Her father had done both, engraved and travelled all the realms to sell his works. Deanne barely had the energy to just keep up with engraving orders all day long. It had been exhausting ever since the business had fallen to her hands. Mother was good with finances but she couldn't be out in the workshop engraving every day after day. If she tried to keep up the current pace she'd work herself to death. Working with the Song so much took more effort than they realized.

She shook her head. No, Deanne, don't dwell on those things, you're going to enjoy this rare evening off. Deanne tried arching her head back tall, the way some of the rich women did. It was not the most comfortable pose. She'd never get the truly upper-class. Her head jerked suddenly as she felt a particularly heavy bump beneath her and the carriage ground to a halt. Deanne struggled to regain her poise as the coachman approached her opening the door.

"We have arrived," the coachman announced.

Deanne stepped out onto the lawn of the Cartier manor. An impressive building it jutted out upon the top of the hill overlooking the valley. On the far side of the property was the enormous waterfall, currently frozen, which dropped right off the cliff, breaking off towards the river that wove its way further down the mountain. The Cartier family could look down upon the land at their leisure. That was generally a sign of status for most rich families, it wasn't Cartier exclusive. If you were well-off, you got the highest perch. The manor was well enough maintained despite the strong winter snows. On a different occasion Deanne would have loved to have examined the metalworking of the grounds, white wrought iron fences which barred the way from thieves which sizzled with fearsome blue sparks.

Deanne followed the coachman through the gates, down a small but well maintained stone path towards the manor proper. The path was well shoveled despite the growing snowbanks covering the lawn on both sides. As she pulled her coat closer across her body she could feel the goosebumps on her skin and her dress was not doing as much to ward off the cold. Well that will change once we get inside.

They proceeded towards the doors of the manor which the coachman opened for her graciously. Beautiful warm pink light rushed into her eyes, but as she rushed inside she was more excited to leave the freezing hilltop. The coachman closed the door behind them, which settled with a resounding thump aided by the fierce wind.

“Right, I will go and fetch Master Cartier for my delivery fee and let him know we’ve arrived. I’ll be in the stables when you’re ready to head home for the evening.”

Deanne observed the glowing pinkish rocks hanging near the door. It felt as if they were breathing warm air right towards her. A clever trick, some sort of heat recycling system probably? She checked around the base, ah ha, a type of pipe pumping something into the rocks. I wonder if I could use a similar mechanism to heat our place...

“Deanne, I am so pleased you were able to make it. How is your sister feeling? Not too upset I’m stealing you away for an evening?” Vincen’s voice came booming before him even as he stepped into her field of vision.

“Seems like she’s feeling better, and I think she’s turned to sulking. Slightly better than tantrums at least. I haven’t seen her all day” Deanne embraced Vincen in a warm hug, “how about yourself? And what are these contraptions?”

“I’m doing well enough despite my customers best efforts. Lord Donra wants me to decrease the pricing on our ice exports to his merchants. He’s turning out to be quite the *ice cold* negotiator. Though I didn’t invite you here to talk business.” Vincen complained returning the friendly embrace.

“If you want to talk about it, I’m here for you,” she replied, only vaguely interested. In truth hearing about the Cartier’s merchant dealings sounded absolutely boring. She was much more interested in spending the evening together. They’d have some fun chatting, drink some alcohol, let loose from the business for a while.

To her great relief, instead Deanne noticed Vincen rubbing his hand against the hearthstones. He cracked a grin as white as the storm outside, “Don’t think I didn’t notice you observing the hearthstones. Fascinating little machines, freshly imported from the Cerulean Circle. I think I’ll be able to corner the market next year, a hearthstone in every house.”

So much for not talking business, Deanne inwardly groaned. On the outside though she plastered an interested smile, “You are a savvy businessman. I’ll give you that.”

Vincen chuckled, “There I go again, I’m sorry. Are you hungry? I’m afraid it’s going to be a bit longer tonight. I let most of my servants head to their homes because of the coming storm. Was thinking of sending a message to reschedule but then you arrived. We’ll make due.”

"Hungry? I'm starved," she interjected hurriedly. Vincen raised a curious eyebrow. Maybe some food would calm her nerves. Why was she so nervous? It was just Vincen, not like they hadn't been friends for years. What was one dinner among friends? Her heart was beating faster than usual. That was unusual. Vincen had never gotten her this flustered until recently.

"Well no need to rush. We have all night to chat and eat. This storm's getting worse by the minute, I'll have a spare room prepared. If you're *really* that hungry though I'm sure we can rustle up some snacks before dinner." Vincen said snapping his fingers at a nearby servant. The servant bowed and dashed off.

Vincen took her hand which felt warm and soft compared to her chilled and callused fingers, and led her into the sitting room. She felt oddly lightheaded and her breath came a bit faster. She tried to ignore the feeling as they entered the foyer. A wide room with huge windows able to show a view all the way down into the valley. In clear weather you could see most of the town, though most of what she could see currently was just the raging snowstorm. Vincen led her towards a pillowed couch. Deanne dropped down upon the seat trying to get comfortable.

"Care for a drink?" Vincen inquired as he sat down upon the couch as well. Casually he picked up a nearby bottle of wine from a nearby shelf. He already had a few glasses prepared.

"Yes please," Green liquid dashed from the bottle of wine into a glass. He teased it around in front of her which she eventually grabbed.

"I didn't know you liked Cerulean ice wine, I always thought you preferred torrian ale. Or was I mistaken?"

“Well, now you’ve learned something new about me. After all, only the best between close friends,” Vincen toasted sloshing a little back.

“Yes, between friends,” As she took a sip Deanne couldn’t help but relax a little, she’d never actually had Cerulean ice wine. It turned out she was not a fan of the intense sour flavor.

“It tastes disgusting, doesn’t it?” Vincen winked at her.

She shoved the drink back at him, “Glad to suffer at your expense,”

“Well it works well in a pinch. You’re right I prefer ale, but this was already up here. Didn’t want to wait for something from the cellar...I heard it was a favorite of Ravenna’s so I try to keep it around just in case.” Vincen explained sighing as he tossed the cork aside.

“Is Emeyla finally getting to you?” Deanne asked intrigued, “You said she was dead, you were nearly certain of it.”

“I...it’s complicated,” Vincen mentioned hastily taking a large gulp of the nasty drink, “Part of me was thinking it might be worth taking one last trip before closing that book now that I have the keys. Before we destroy them I mean...it’s the least I could do for your sister. Don’t tell her though, I wouldn’t want to get her hopes up.”

Deanne’s heart stopped in her chest. The idea of going back? Vainly curious she tried prodding further, “Go back? Isn’t that dangerous? If Ravenna could be alive could my father be...?”

“No,” Vincen said sternly, “I saw him die. You’re right, it was a foolish idea. Let’s forget about it.”

Deanne waved it off as if it was no big deal. She'd already come to terms with her father's death. Deanne sighed and nestled her hand against his. He gripped it tightly. There was the Vincen she'd known since childhood and there was the Vincen from after the tragedy. Before they'd simply been friends because of the Cartier family reliance on her father's engraving skills.

Something had changed after the expedition. It made sense that such a tragedy would change a person so drastically. Particularly for someone so integral to the event like Vincen. Before he had travelled all over the place, but ever since he had mainly stayed within their own Circle. The trip to the eighth circle had seemed mainly from her own prodding. It was surprising to even hear him bring up the idea of leaving again. They'd grown closer through his constant visits to their shop. What had changed so drastically?

"Oh look the snacks have arrived," Vincen pointed out to change the subject as a servant arrived with a tray of steaming stuffed shell-like creatures. The second tray contained small cakes of sweet cheese topped with strawberries. Despite the delicious smells Deanne was still distracted by his previous thoughts.

"This is the wondrous advantage of the Doors, sea shrimp in the mountains? Fresh strawberries in a winter storm? Without the commerce between the realms we'd both be snacking on cold stale bread. Can you imagine?" Vincen said enthusiastically trying to change the subject.

Most of us *are* still supping on that cold bread Deanne thought to herself. But that was beside the point. You're here to enjoy yourself, she reminded herself.

"Yes, quite marvelous," she noted instead washing more wine down her throat.

Vincen leaned backward into the couch and casually rearranged his arm around her shoulder.

Deanne was highly aware of the movement and how she felt goosebumps form on her arms.

His eyes lingered over her breasts and she noticed. About time he noticed. She inhaled her breath sharply. Vincen sighed heavily and readjusted his gaze to the ceiling.

"I'm not worth your time,"

"Oh really?" Deanne replied with a chuckle. This evening was not going at all like she had imagined her mind. Vincen seemed away in a different world even if his body was still here.

"This was a terrible idea. The gifts, the visits. I should have never let you get so close to me. It can only end in tragedy."

"Wait what? Why are you telling me this?" She snarled surprising even herself. Her skin bristled, Deanne felt thoroughly annoyed. Why the change of pace? When he'd just been ogling her just before? Maybe he was right, this was a terrible idea. She readjusted away from him on the couch becoming much more interested in the serving tray.

"Well...I thought. Never mind," Vincen didn't look her in the eye. Instead he took another cake from the serving tray. It was the first time she noticed the fresh scars dotting across his wrist. She grasped his arm pulling up the sleeve much to his anger. The whole arm was covered with the pale scars of at least a dozen knives.

“What are these?” Deanne demanded grabbing the arm. The skin felt rough under her fingers. These scars were fresh not yet fully healed.

Vincen chewed on his cake. He attempted to pull down the sleeve. Instead Deanne kept it tight. She leaned forward in her chair resting her other hand upon his shoulder. She looked him closely in his pale gray eyes. They seemed elsewhere. She tried to get them to focus upon her. Deanne could feel his warm breath against the skin of her face. For a long moment there seemed only silence. Finally, Vincen broke the silence with an uncharacteristically wavering voice.

“I-I’m not who you think I am. I care for you, I really do. But I’m not the Vincen you grew up with. You wouldn’t understand, I wish I could explain...”

“Vincen, Vincen, I know the expedition changed you,” Deanne calmly spoke to him, “and I still care for you. I want to help you, to be there for you.”

Deanne hugged him close. She knew he was troubled by the pain of the past year’s events. Vincen instead pulled away from her comforting arms, clearly frustrated. He got up from his chair and started pacing around the room. Angrily he punched the wall and she could see he had tears in his eyes. She’d never seen Vincen like this in all the years she’d ever known him.

“Calm down, it’s not your fault Vincen! Calm down.” Deanne tried to find the right words. She was used to the workshop, soothed by the Song. Here without her tools, she was exposed as he was, clueless how to fix this problem.

“Master Vincen, dinner is served,” one of the remaining servants popped his head into the sitting room.

Vincen seemed to be drawn back to the moment. Embarrassed he hung his head low and started slinking towards the dining room. Deanne cautiously followed, more unsure than ever. This evening was turning out to have more emotions than she was used to. She continued her way down the hall beside him.

The dinner was beautiful set up on a short table lit only by shimmering candles. For a moment Deanne felt rather awkward so she found herself burying her emotions with succulent food and wineglass more than conversation. Deanne couldn't focus on the food though. She usually tried to ignore such strong emotions. The liquid courage was helping though her mind was starting to feel foggy at the edges. No more alcohol for you tonight, she noted after her second glass. Vincen was trying to find a good way to recover the conversation. Finally stirred on by the alcohol he spoke.

“I want you to be happy, you know that right?”

“Yeah, I want you to be happy too,” Deanne agreed groggily, after the meal her stomach was already trying to lure her to sleep.

“You look very pretty in that dress,” Vincen said as he yawned scrunching his face up.

“Aw thanks,” Deanne replied as her face flushed with red. To distract herself she pretended to be interested in the waning of the candlelight. If he had decided they couldn't be together why

was he flirting all of the sudden? She struggled between which feelings she wanted to lead with. She didn't want to take advantage of him clearly not being in a sober state.

Eventually she decided on a compromise, "I could be pretty more often if you want me to be pretty," Deanne remarked curious to gauge his reaction.

"Pretty is as pretty does. I'm much more interested in the capability of a woman. Like how capable a woman can work with her hands..." he got up from the table and made his way towards her.

"I can do a lot of things with my hands," she teased deciding to give into her frantic heartbeat. She struggled between the feeling to run away and to jump upon him. She'd known Vincen for so long and they were good friends. They could work through this, work through their grief together. Her mind went a mile a minute. She cared deeply for the man, if they truly were meant to be together they could work through these struggles.

Deanne felt as if she had dived into his deep eyes as she stumbled to her feet. Vincen came closer and her heart fluttered. She stumbled as he reached out a cautious hand. Hesitant but reaching out. As she tottered she grabbed at the table to steady herself instead succeeding in knocking one of the candles off of the table. It quickly started to burn a circle around the carpet. Great, she thought, way to ruin the moment. Vincen responded instinctively, he grabbed a jug of ice water and tossed it at the fire. Half of it landed on the tiny flames, dousing them, the other half splashed onto her face. She yelped.

Brrr, the chilling water jolted her mind back into focus.

"I'm so sorry!" Vincen winced.

"It's okay it's just water. After your chocolates and cake I think it's the least expensive thing you've given me in a long time."

Vincen grabbed a hand cloth from the table. He leaned in close dabbing at the wetness across her brow. His hand felt warm even through the cloth. He smiled sadly at her.

"I don't know how to ask this...but if you're really interested..." Vincen started before Deanne interrupted.

"Then don't ask. Let's enjoy what's left of the rest of the evening, we can ask questions in the morning," Deanne murmured as she pulled herself closer to Vincen's sweet embrace.

"Perhaps we should relocate somewhere else and continue this conversation?" She grazed a finger playfully across his chest as she glanced around the now darker dining hall. The alcohol had loosened up her inhibitions and she was feeling playful. This evening had too much dark already, it was time for some fun.

. Vincen cautiously caressed a hand upon her face, "Is this okay?" he asked.

"I...suppose...yes," she acquiesced. After that they dashed down the mosaicked halls chuckling and teasing each other. They were both drunk and they had weeks if not months of pent up emotion to work out with each other. He led her away into his bedroom where they crashed upon his bed.

They playfully wrestled upon the bed and she began to playfully tease her dress from her body.

As she played with her dress Vincen fumbled with taking off his own shirt. He seemed so nervous. Her heart was racing as well. She was nervous too. Was this the right decision?

Deanne had seen his outburst earlier. She stopped for a moment as she noticed Vincen for the first time with his shirt off.

Silence, Vincen's body...she'd never known how many scars he had on his body before. Long marks of burnt, scarred skin covered his back. His chest was covered with similar burns and a long stroke that fell from near his neck to the side of his waist. She remembered his flawless skin from childhood. Now she felt it was her skin that was practically flawless in his presence. What had happened?

"Those scars, how did you get all of those?"

"These? I couldn't even remember where half of them are from its been so long..."

That didn't seem right. Before she could fully process the statement there was a thoroughly loud crash. It shocked her and turned her thoughts elsewhere. What in nine realms? Vincen was thrown off as well and cursed. He picked up a knife from his bedside beckoning for her to sit down.

"Probably just the roof under the weight of the snow, but I should probably check," Vincen said as he reached for his trousers.

Before he had even put on his trousers, Deanne heard a second crash, louder than the last.

Deanne groaned now vividly aware of the fact that despite their best efforts the night was conspiring against them. She placed her hands out in front of her. She pulled at his legs gently rubbing her fingers across his thick black hairs.

“Vincen, Madsen can handle it, that’s what you hired him for. Come with me, we were just getting somewhere.” She implored in a gentle tone.

Vincen gave a deep sigh and turned back to her, “you’re probably right.”

Deanne paused for a moment catching her breath. Before she could readjust he turned on her with a sweet smile on his face. In a surprise he pounced upon her pinning her to the bed. His strong arms embraced her and adrenaline rushed through her veins making her feel truly alive. Her heart soared into a celebratory crescendo.

“Damn, you’re strong,” Deanne arched her body up to meet him. She began to shudder with pleasure as Vincen clutched a rough hand around her neck. She writhed with unexpected pleasure. Why had she waited so long to catch on to this?

Emeyla:

Emeyla could barely feel her fingers even beneath the heavy furred gloves. The cold ice of the frozen waterfall was uneven as it had frozen over the rock of the mountain. Snow flew at her face as she swung the axe in her hand into the next part of frozen water.

“Emeyla, you’re crazy,” She muttered to herself. It would have been much easier she’d decided to wait till the storm broke, but she couldn’t wait. The longer she waited the more chance that Cartier and Deanne would get rid of or destroy the keys. So instead she was clawing her way up the waterfall so she could get inside the Cartier estate.

She’d spent all afternoon drawing up the perfect plan. All she had to do was climb the frozen waterfall, it was the only part of the Cartier property his security fence couldn’t cover. From there she could navigate across the lawn fairly easily, she doubted there were many guards out in this blizzard. She’d gotten out her old lock-picking tools. It’d be easy enough to pick the lock to the cellar. From there she’d just have to avoid running into Vincen and Ravenna. She’d always been a talented climber, though she was nervous about climbing in the snow storm. The thought crossed her mind how Cartier was going to be alone with her sister all evening. She shuddered at the thought of what they might be doing together.

Regardless though, she’d pick up her father’s songweaver then use his journal to find him and Ravenna. She’d have to track down the keys too, she wasn’t entirely sure where they’d be, she might have to search around a while. But before anyone knew she’d be gone by mid-morning. It was a brilliant plan as long as she managed to pull it off. If there was evidence of their deaths, or nothing to suggest their aliveness Emeyla had decided she’d finally put the issue to rest. Her sister did need her, and even though Vincen was clearly up to something she didn’t want to bring the Firstborn down on her family. One visit, that’s all, to put things to rest, she promised herself.

She clawed up the next part of the slippery ice carefully trying to keep her balance. The backpack on her back shifted precariously and Emeyla took an extra moment to ensure she kept her footing. She was not used to the clawed boots upon her feet, but they made the ice climbing much more effective. Emeyla was glad her ice climbing gear had still been where she'd left it. She released a tense breath, as she continued to shimmy up the stone precipice.

Meanwhile Deanne's probably in front of a roaring fire sipping tea and eating cookies.

Crack, she dug her first climbing axe into the next section of ice continuing to climb up the inclining waterfall. Emeyla strained her muscles to pull herself up further the crag. Peeking out from beneath her heavy scarf she could see the edge of the waterfall flattening out into the hillside. It couldn't be that much longer now. She removed the axe in her right hand from its block of ice and swung further up.

Clang, she'd missed. The backlash from the axe upon hard stone instead of ice reverberated through her arm throwing her off balance. Anxiously Emeyla leaned her weight towards the pick in her left while she tried to recover. Hurriedly she swung again lodging the axe deep into the frozen depths of the waterfall. She was able to pull herself up to the next section of the waterfall, fixing her feet.

Emeyla tried to remove the axe. It didn't budge. She tried again straining her muscles. Still no movement it was wedged deep into the ice. Silence, she tried again. No luck, she'd probably have to leave it. Shame, she liked that axe. Well maybe she could return once it had thawed a bit, thought it'd probably be too rusty. Very carefully she removed the other axe from the ice. Immediately she thrust it back into the next ice chunk, swinging her body carefully to move up

the incline. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, come on, you can do this. She chopped through the air, swing, chop, jump.

As Emeyla geared up for a jump a cascade of falling snow fell near her eyes. As she shifted to clear her line of vision a foot claw came loose. Emeyla's feet swung wildly through the air, which she tried to reposition, but they fell upon solid stone again. Straining to maintain her grip on the remaining climbing axe she felt her body drift off of the edge of the waterfall. For a moment she was paralyzed. Her heart heaved in her chest, her breath halted. There was nothing below her but the frozen river hundreds of frozen feet below.

"Focus Emeyla, you've been in worse scrapes." Okay that was a lie, most of her travels had been relatively quiet in comparison to dangling off an icy cliff side. Her body felt heavy and she was fighting the numbness of being out in this roaring storm. Still she could handle this, she could handle it. She took a deep breath inhaling the bitter cold. She kicked her left leg up towards herself as high as she could.

In a desperate moment she clutched at the foot claw holding it tight. Every muscle in her body was screaming at her as she tried to keep her body from falling into the depths below. Carefully with frigid fumbling hands she removed the foot claw from its binding to her foot. It came loose but before she could readjust it the claw went hurtling down into the abyss below.

"Well silence," she cursed as she took a moment to recover her balance. She gripped the axe as tight as she could and she tried the same maneuver with her other foot. She swung it up but

failed to grab the claw before she had to move it down to keep her balance. Every muscle on her body strained, her breaths came short, staggered.

“Come on, come on,” she swung her foot up again, gripping the claw tightly. She held it between a few fingers and her teeth as she carefully tied it around her glove. Hoping it would work she dug the rigged clawed glove into the ice above her.

It stuck! Finally, something worked.

Carefully she shifted her weight between the claw and the axe. A very cautious axe swing later and she was moving again. Emeyla breathed a tense sigh of relief.

“You’re not out of this yet though.” She muttered to herself as she shifted herself forward.

This climb was much more treacherous than her last one. Every moment of her feet dangling in the air felt like she could drop towards her demise. After what seemed an eternity she met the edge of the waterfall as it buried itself into the mountain side of the manor.

Straining from the effort she heaved herself upon the hillside. Her entire body shook as she let out a tense breath. The soft snowy earth beneath her legs was so comforting. She just lay there for a moment before pushing herself back to a standing position. Emeyla had never thought in her life she’d be so glad to see the Cartier manor.

Emeyla could see the sizzling sparks of the nearby white iron fences. blue little lightning bolts, she was glad she’d avoided dealing with those monsters. She’d come out at the right place, they buzzed harmlessly on each side of the waterfall. She looked up near the house. She was

facing the side of the manor. Carefully selected stone with great glass windows set along the walls it would have been beautiful in any other weather. At the moment most of the slated roof was covered in snow, and the hanging icicles looked as if they were melted glass crawling down the side of the building.

Still she was far from in the clear yet. Emeyla kept hunched over, in the dark any guards would be even harder to spot. She didn't spot any out in the storm though. Maybe her hunch had been right. If it was not for a few faintly burning lights she wouldn't have been able to tell she was even prowling a lawn. There was so much snow. Her feet sank into the snow. She hoped she was managing to actually walk on the lawn. She couldn't tell where the river ended and the lawn began.

Cautiously, she kept low to the ground as she made her way towards the manor. She tried to be deliberately quiet with her footsteps. The snow was deep and made it hard to move quickly. She lifted a tired leg followed by another. Careful to steady her breath she trudged across the ground. Emeyla stumbled her way to one of the nearby stone walls of the manor. Then cautiously, her eyes flicking from side to side she started slinking across the manor backside towards the cellar. It was hard to tell which direction was which in this storm. Come on Emeyla, you can do this. You have to do this.

Carefully she wove her way around the wall of the manor. By now the soreness of her body was starting to seep away as the cold from the stones began to flow through her body though. Emeyla could feel patches of her face growing ice cold. Shivers were starting to occur all over her body outside of her control. I've been out too long; I need to get inside soon.

Emeyla searched around for the nearest door. Exactness wouldn't help her if she was too frozen to move. Frantically she began searching around. Finally, she found a small door near the ground, her hands were too numb to grab her lockpicking tools out of her bag. Instead she stomped upon it with her leg. She was practically surprised when it crashed open with noisy creak the boards splintering. Well Vincen can afford to get it fixed.

Hurriedly she dove into the warmer welcoming cellar. Removing her scarf, it appeared to be the cellar she had been planning on break into. It was musty but much warmer than the frigid blizzard beyond its walls. Some cold came across from the broken door. There wasn't much she could do about that by this point. Hopefully this wasn't a wild gremleck chase or Vincen would be furious when he found out. She took a moment to cup her hands across her face gently blowing into them. The air pushed back against her skin starting to slowly regain feeling. Now she only felt starving, her body feeling empty. Her throat was parched begging for some liquid.

"If this is the cellar there should be some food and drink in here," she whispered to herself. Emeyla glanced pulled a torch out of her backpack. She had to be content with lighting it the old fashioned way, with a flint. As the light flickered into being she glanced around the room. She had been right, there were barrels lining the walls. In between the rows of barrels were corked bottles. Reaching into one of those crevices she managed to grab one. She fiddled around with it for a few moments before successfully managing to remove the cork. Without hesitation she put the bottle to her lips and began pouring its contents down her parched throat.

She was pleasantly surprised to find the sweet taste of spiced apple cider instead of the wine she had been expecting. Letting out a contented sigh she plucked a radish hanging from the ceiling and chomped a crunchy bite out of it. Emeyla had to resist the urge to laugh.

“Nearly dying sure works up an appetite.”

The well wanted respite was welcome but Emeyla couldn't dwell here for long. After all she was trespassing for a reason. She had to return to the plan, get the songweaver, get the keys, rescue her swornmate. She waved her torch around trying to see if there was another door. It looked like there was, she could see it through the flickering light of the flame. She returned the now half empty bottle to its stand and made her way towards the door into the manor. She tried jimmying it, unfortunately this one was more secure.

Now that her fingers were less numb, Emeyla dug into the bag on her back, searching around for her old lock kit. A few carefully shifted tumblers later and she heard a resounding click as the door unlocked. She stepped into a dimly lit but quite warm hallway. Small glowing rocks seemed to be held like candles on the walls. I always knew he had a screw loose, who lights their house with rocks? She chuckled at the thought. Deanne probably found it brilliant. Well they could celebrate their glowing rocks all they wanted when she returned home victorious.

Carefully she made her way down the hallway. She thought she recognized this particular section of the mosaicked walls. She creaked open the door to her left. It revealed the tiny guest room she had previously been a tenant of. Alright Vincen probably put the songweaver

probably in the trophy room, he'd want to show off the original design to visitors. She hustled down the hallway making her way towards the trophy room.

As she went down the hall she noticed that it gradually grew messier. The shields on the wall were hanging lopsided as if they had been pushed or grabbed at. The rug beneath her feet was tangled up slightly. What had her sister and Cartier been doing?

The door to the trophy room was open. She could see her father's gauntlet; it had been added to a display underneath the painting she'd seen on her previous visit. Above both a plaque had been added that read "in memory of..." it was more sentimental then she had expected. It distracted her for a moment. She'd forgotten how close Vincen and her father had been. They had worked together for years. Was she doing the right thing? Breaking in? Stealing from him?

No, remember this is the same man who stood by while a man was murdered in cold blood. Whatever else he was, he was a liar, there was more to the expedition then he had admitted. Who had that strange man been? Why did he have to be killed? She was pulled out of her thoughts as she heard a loud snore from nearby.

Emeyla glanced around the room. Surprisingly it was a sleeping Madsen. Interesting he was sleeping down here instead of closer to the master bedroom. He was curled up like a great dog upon a couch. She'd almost missed him, his dark fur blended in with the dark of the couch in the corner. Great, let's try not to wake him. She glanced around the room then carefully put a foot forward.

The room scattered with various trophies from his previous expeditions across the years. Carefully she tip-toed past the trophies. Her heart raced as with bated breath she tried to navigate around the couch. Surprisingly the beast only snored on. She continued forward cautiously. Emeyla edged behind the couch and in front of the display. She had to reach onto her tip-toes but then-yes! She held the gauntlet in her hand. She tried to gently remove it. Unfortunately, she hadn't realized how securely it had been attached. Emeyla pulled at it, it was quite secured. She pulled at it further.

There was a loud crash as the gauntlet separated from its pedestal. Madsen snarled awake with the noise. Emeyla slid on the gauntlet. Much to her surprise it held a full charge. As Madsen began to rise towards her vicious claws descending she opened the flow. Blue mist swirled around the gauntlet. With utmost terror she pointed it at him yelling frantically.

"Die," the beast resisted growling harshly, "Die," she commanded and the silvery blue mist forced their way around his face. It made him fall to the ground twitching. Damn, that beast was strong, she thought. Now she was mentally exhausted as well as physically. It seemed Madsen was more unconscious than dead, but she'd take it. At least he was out of commission. Though she wasn't sure for how long.

She scurried around the room hurriedly hoping to find the keys. Emeyla was doubtful though. If they were so important then Cartier wouldn't just be leaving them around anywhere. Emeyla upended every jar, every bag, everything she could find in vain. Of course, Cartier wouldn't be taking any chances, they had to be in the master bedroom.

Great, she groaned as she got up from the mess she had made. She rushed out of the room and towards Cartier's bedroom. Hopefully him and Deanne were somewhere else. Though she hadn't seen any glances of them earlier.

She'd have to be smart about this. She'd have to cause a distraction get them out of the room.

Emeyla looked around. The stones lining the hallway, maybe she could break one of them?

Emeyla put her hands around one of them, it was surprisingly warmer than she expected. It

burnt hot against the metal of the songweaver now firmly on her hand. She summoned the

smallest bit of Song to help her pull at the stone. Her brow furrowed with sweat, then-crash,

the stone came out of its socket. With both her arms she took the stone and threw it down the stairs. As it clattered noisily she hid in a nearby closet.

Nothing. The bedroom didn't stir. Maybe she'd been wrong they weren't in there? She waited

another moment to see if anyone would come out. No one. Cautiously Emeyla went to the

door. Quietly she edged the door open.

As the door opened she did not expect the sight that greeted her. Her sister and Cartier

wrapped together underneath the sheets. And beside them on top of a nightstand was a bag of

glimmering silver beads. Her sister and Cartier stared back at her with confusion and shock in

their eyes. Their eyes darted from each other to her, to the bag on the nightstand, back and

forth.

"What's going on here?" Vincen demanded as he sat up in the bed. Breathlessly in an instant he

grabbed his golden songweaver off the night stand. This was not ideal. Far from ideal. Emeyla's

breath picked up. No, she had to focus. Anger coursed through her veins, white hot anger zipping from the bottom of her toes to the tip of her head.

Emeyla's switch was still flipped on her songweaver. She aimed the brass glove at Vincen and Deanne on the bed. In a furious bout of rage, she knew what she had to do. Deanne needed to know the truth about who she was going to bed with.

"I think it's time we have a little chat."

"Emeyla, I'm going to give you one warning to turn that off and walk away and we'll forget about this whole trespassing incident," Vincen was standing up moving off the bed aiming his own songweaver at her. Emeyla glanced to her sister, then back to Vincen. Vincen's own songweaver was starting to hum with its own silvery blue mist.

"Do you know who this is Deanne? Did he tell you how he found me? Legs broken, arms scratched up after a nasty fall running from Hunters. I was with a man, a man who just saved my life from drowning." Her breath came quickly as she spoke the words.

Vincen took a step forward towards her menacingly, "What in nine realms are you talking about Emeyla?"

"You killed my rescuer in cold blood," she continued gritting her teeth.

"That's a Song damned lie," he hissed at her. His eyes fluttered over to Deanne, "Deanne,"

"Deanne," Emeyla pleaded, "I was there. Who are you going to believe, him over your own sister?"

Deanne pulled the covers around herself. Her body drawing away from both of them. Emeyla brought her gaze back to Vincen staring him down with a mad fury.

"It all makes sense now. How long have you been the Firstborn's hired killer?" She growled. She held her fist steady the Song spitting out around her songweaver angrily.

"It's not like that, the Firstborn order things. I can only do so much-that man would have brought ruin upon us all." He gritted his teeth as he spat the words.

"Deanne, see he even admits it, Deanne think" Emeyla shouted triumphant,

"No, Deanne think, be practical. I have to follow orders or else they'd kill me and everyone I love too," Vincen looked upon Deanne's eyes begging for understanding.

Before she could respond the door flung open. The only words that came out of Deanne's mouth were, "Madsen?"

Madsen stumbled into the room clutching his head he howled at Vincen from the door, "The bitch tried to kill me, she tried to kill me," he shouted angrily walking towards her.

"Madsen," Emeyla pleaded knowing she was outnumbered, "I didn't, I didn't have a choice."

"You could have killed me," he roared even louder. Deanne was still clutching her covers tight to her chest.

"All of these years growing up together," Emeyla yelled back at Deanne, "and you take his side? Think. I'm trying to look out for you. For us,"

"You be quiet, your head is in the clouds," Vincen yelled back.

"Both of you shut up," Deanne finally interjected. Determined she stood up between the two of them thrusting her hands between them.

"I don't know what's gone down between you two but this feud needs to end now. Vincen, it's obvious you're not telling me something. Emeyla, that's still no excuse to break into his house. Now let's all calm down before we do something we'll all regret," she took another careful step forward making sure her body was shielding the two from each other.

They all stood still for what seemed an eternity. A thought crossed her mind. One that she hadn't thought to ask before. Finally, Emeyla broke the silence, her voice sounded strained, "Why didn't you kill me? Its obvious back on the island you were told to. Why didn't you kill me?"

"I-I'm not a murderer. I would never want to hurt you anymore then I'd want to hurt Deanne. I took a huge risk in disobeying that order. I could have-I still might pay with my life. The Firstborn are not forgiving. Please show me that wasn't a mistake."

Vincen dropped his arm. He flipped the switch on his songweaver. Then he backed away. Emeyla hesitated for a second then lowered her own as well. Deanne sighed relieved. Emeyla let out a long awaited breath. As Emeyla was about to speak something she remembered something they'd forgotten about.

Madsen was not so easily placated. He threw a still furious claw at Emeyla. Emeyla dodged it just in the nick of time. Deanne and Vincen both swirled around to face him.

“Madsen, calm down. Everything’s okay, we need you to calm down.”

They both were upon the beast holding him back from hurting Emeyla further. Emeyla glanced at them. Then she glanced back at the keys laying out upon the table. They were just there, just out of reach. Vincen and Deanne were even occupied. But she should help they were after all trying to protect her. Though the temptation was so strong.

She couldn’t resist. Emeyla snatched the purse. She grasped into the bag with her hands and pulled a silver gleaming key of out of its depths. Both Vincen and Deanne looked upon her clearly as surprised as Emeyla was. She didn’t have an indentation for the Circle so she just picked one at random. She had no idea what consequence that would have, but it was her only choice.

“Emeyla-” He howled out aggressively but was still too distracted with the furious Madsen.

Deanne broke away. She rushed her was upon her as the gauntlet was gearing up. Eyes wide and heart beating wildly Deanne was yelling at her. She couldn’t make out the words though every one of her senses seemed drilled into doing only one thing. Forming a Door. She felt her heart beating faintly and someone pulling against her. From the songweaver the vivid mist was condensing, trying to form a Door as she commanded. Come on, come on, she urged it.

The Door was solidifying, large enough to walk through. Emeyla pushed her way towards the portal so she could step through. As it developed and surged into a portal she felt an incredible tug upon her arm. Deanne was still grabbing at her. She gritted her teeth and tried to pull away. Her muscles strained as she tried to resist the struggle while stepping through the portal. Together they tumbled through the brightly glowing door.

CHAPTER 9

BURNT BUT FAMILY

Emeyla:

She'd fallen upon the snow. Her muscles ached from the fall. She couldn't tell exactly where she had fallen. Her eyes blurred and took a moment to readjust. Her head was throbbing.

"I don't understand," Emeyla ejaculated loudly as her eyes readjusted she took in her surroundings. As the Song faded away she could see she was staring at the same slated roof covered in snow. The same glass windows...the same hanging icicles looked as if they were melted glass crawling down the side of the building. She knew this place. This was the Cartier manor. She had just been inside. Now she was on the snow covered lawn. Her sister lay beside her freezing in the grass, nearly naked.

Emeyla looked down at the gauntlet on her arm. It was smoking, blackened and warped as if it had been thrown into a furnace. She struggled to remove it in its warped state. Before she could focus on that she needed to help her sister though. She ran over to the place where her sister had fallen onto the snow beside her. Her skin was already starting to turn a hue of blue.

"Deanne, get up, we can't rest here." Emeyla prodded at her.

"You...idiot," Deanne shouted as she wrapped her arms around her. The wind was picking up. In this temperature she wouldn't last long without freezing to death from any clothes. Emeyla ripped off her heavy jacket and spread it around her. She glanced up towards the spires of the

manor. As much as she hated to do it after this fiasco she'd have to ask Vincen for help, to help her sister.

"You're lucky that didn't kill both of us" Deanne grumbled. "I think so...I'd be furious at you right now if I wasn't focused on not freezing to death. As soon as we get inside and warm..." Deanne growled at her.

Vincen had opened the door by the time they reached it. His eyes were somewhere between a cold fury and terror. Hurriedly he shoved a heavy blanket upon Deanne. Vincen cradled her in his arms as he lifted her sister up and carried her over towards the roaring fireplace.

Emeyla was struck speechless. She didn't know what to do. She was torn between the shock of what had just happened and where she was currently at. Emeyla had done something, but not travelled to another circle most certainly. She looked down at her father's songweaver. It had melted around her arm. She had been so distracted by her sister she not noticed the burns scattered across her skin. Her arm felt numb.

"Emeyla, we need to talk now." Vincen was back. His gray eyes pierced her staring down into her soul.

"I-I-I don't understand." She mumbled in a daze.

"My servants have summoned the nearest esoteric and have been told to inform your mother. Before they get here I would like to talk." Vincen gestured towards the sitting room.

Still in a daze Emeyla followed Vincen. Emeyla had no words to say. She'd failed, all of that effort had been for nothing. Clumsily she crashed down upon the couch while Vincen pulled up a chair of his own.

"Vincen- could this not have waited a bit? I feel sick."

He ignored her words. Her head was swimming. Taking in painful deep breaths she tried to calm down and focus on his words.

"You're badly hurt. The esoteric will have something for those burns. Hopefully we can save the arm."

Vincen seemed to have ignored her protests. Emeyla sighed as she realized she would have to grin and bear it. Vincen clasped his palms together and leaned forward. He seemed to rock back and forth trying to decide what to say. Emeyla felt lightheaded. Finally, Vincen spoke carefully.

"I watched many good men die fighting for what they believed. My men were torn apart savagely. It was the worst moment of my life. I've gone through many experiences but watching my men die in vain was the worst thing I had ever experienced."

Emeyla perked up trying to pay attention. She had asked him about what happened before, but he had never shared. Instead she had been left to stew over her emotions by herself. Vincen noticed and continued.

"I led those men to their deaths. I was doing what I thought was right, what I thought was expected of me. The fact that I survived and they did not will haunt me to my dying day. I...I ran away too. I couldn't handle what happened to those I cared about. So I ran, to somewhere I believed I would be safe."

"What about my father? Your sister?" Emeyla interjected, "how could you leave them?"

Vincen tensed up. An eternity later he responded, "I will regret the loss of my family until the day I die. It is a burden I have to bear. I was a coward; I ran instead of dying like the rest. Maybe someday I could share the rest of the story but today what happened in the Forgotten Circle isn't important. What matters is that you have family that is still here. That still needs you. Don't forget those who love you who are still living for the sake of the love of those who are dead."

Vincen stood up and began to walk towards Emeyla, "I love your sister. I cannot imagine what I would do if I lost her. I would be deeply troubled by the grief. I can imagine what you went through losing Ravenna. You need to embrace your mother and your sister though. They really care for you. I wish I still had that kind of family."

Vincen offered a hug to Emeyla. Emeyla tensed up. No, he was right. She needed to embrace her family. It was tough for everyone, but she needed to be there for her family. Like she had wanted with Ravenna, him and Deanne were family. She embraced him back. As she did she felt the whisper of the Song tickling her ear.

"Sleep," she heard Vincen whisper before she fell into a dreamless slumber.

Deanne:

Deanne didn't think she'd shared a bed with her sister since she was eight. However, there was her sister beside her. She woke up feeling her sister's warm skin with her hands. Gently she got up from the bed to see her mother by the bedside. Vincen must have summoned her.

"Mother," Deanne started before embracing her in a hug.

"Vincen told me what happened. You're alright?"

"Just a bit bruised from the fall," Deanne admitted, "we were lucky. How are you? I imagine it had to have been a really long night."

"It was exhausting. As soon as the snow cleared enough Vincen had a cabbie take me up to the manor. I'm just so glad you two are alright. I still don't understand exactly what happened."

"It.... was complicated. Not as important though as seeing you here. The important thing is that we're all together."

"Yes, I agree," they were both startled hearing Emeyla's voice. Apparently she had woken up as well.

Emeyla sat up on the bed. Deanne stared at her arm. The songweaver had been removed but now there were burns all across her arm. Songcloth surrounded them but Deanne wasn't sure how permanent those scars looked. Emeyla gave Deanne and her mother both a sad smile.

"I'm sorry I kept running away. That was extremely foolish of me last night. Vincen talked to me...he made me see some sense."

Deanne raised an eyebrow. This seemed a highly unexpected turn of events. "Vincen and you talked? Without snapping?"

"Look, I know I've been terrible to live with for the past couple months. I just missed Ravenna so much. I miss father so much. But Vincen reminded me of something I still do have. Both of you. I don't want to push that away any longer." Emeyla announced offering her mother a hug.

Deanne moved in to embrace both of them as well, "I'm sorry I've been so absorbed with my work. I didn't mean to push either of you away. I've been letting too much stress get to me.

Together though we can be stronger, we'll find a way to run the shop, make it work."

Mother smiled. Deanne enjoyed being there with her family. As they embraced Vincen entered the room. He looked awkward standing on the outside staring at them hugging. Vincen let out a large sigh and smiled though.

"Vincen," Deanne jumped upon him in a kiss, pushing them both to the ground. She wanted to accept all of the family she had. Vincen had grown to be that as well, even if a different type.

For a moment all was silent.

They were all together. Deanne could barely believe it.

She glanced around, her mother had a satisfied look upon her face. Emeyla took a moment then eventually nodded her head. As if to say, fine if you have to. Deanne glanced around the room trying not to feel embarrassed. It was okay. After they separated, Emeyla turned to Vincen and offered him a hug of her own volition. With a great sigh of relief, he returned the hug.

“I’m so sorry for the way I’ve been treating you,” she said.

“Apology accepted” Vincen admitted, “I know how deeply you cared for my sister and I want you to be happy.”

“And I know how much you care for my sister,” Emeyla replied.

Then Vincen turned back to Deanne and surprised her by embracing her again. Deanne sighed contentedly, that was something that would take getting used to.

She couldn’t believe it. It felt like a dream. But maybe this was what it took for them to finally be on the road to recovery. After Emeyla’s time away, Vincen’s survivor’s guilt and her budding romance things would never quite be as they once were. She had everyone she needed in this room. They were a family.

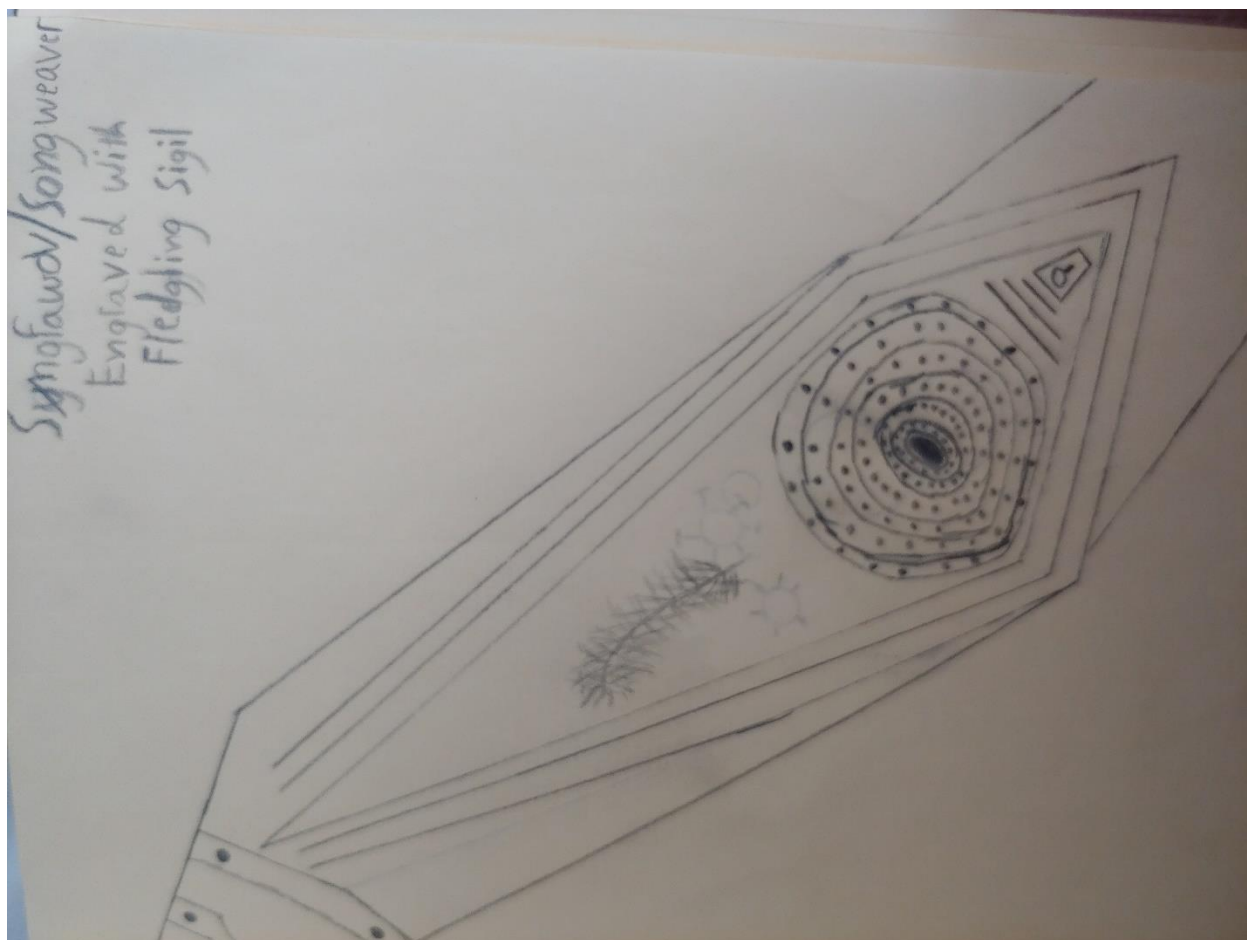
APPENDIX A: SONGWEAVER & SONG TOOLS

Figure A. 1

Songweaver design sketch

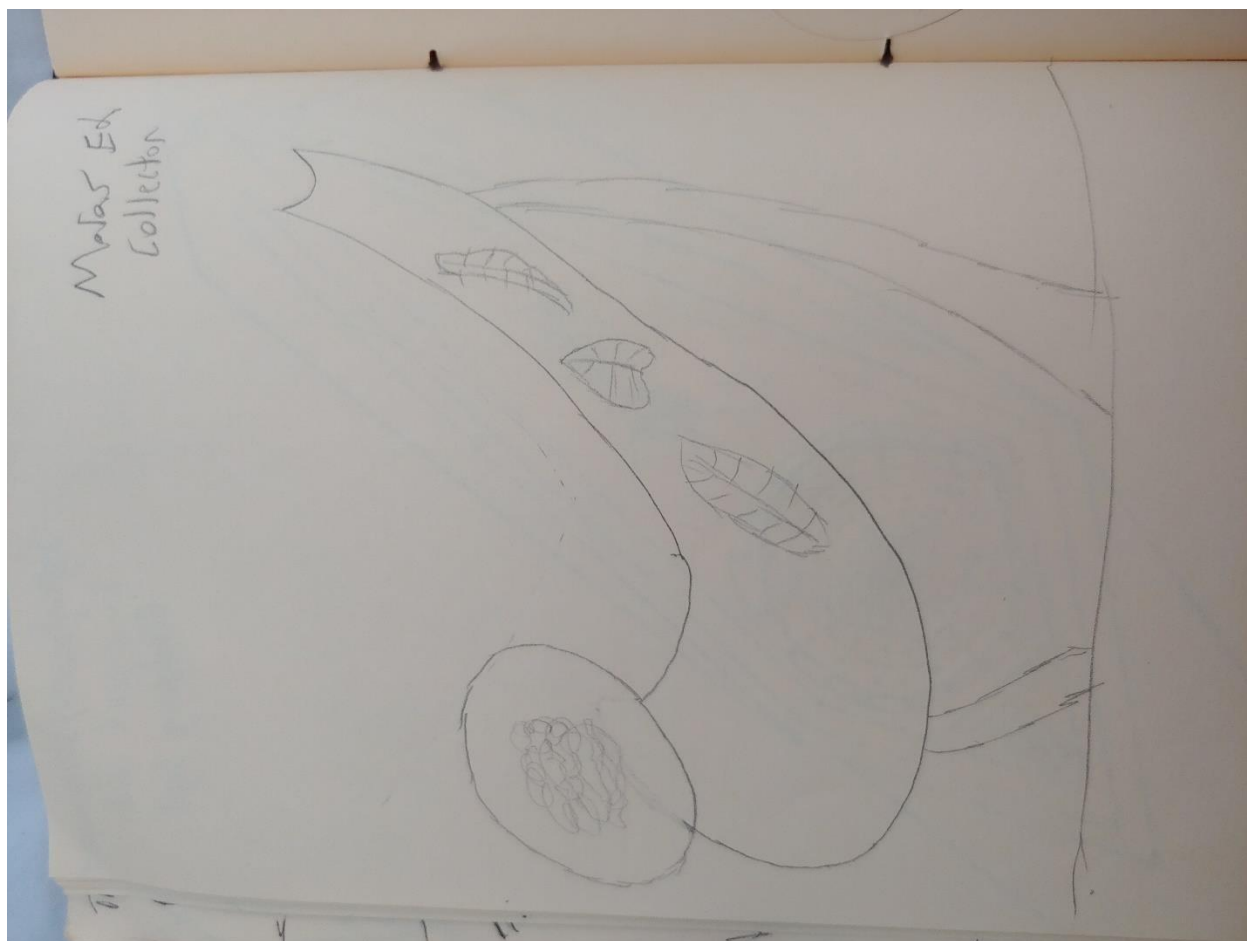


Figure A. 2

Maras 2nd ed. Collector sketch

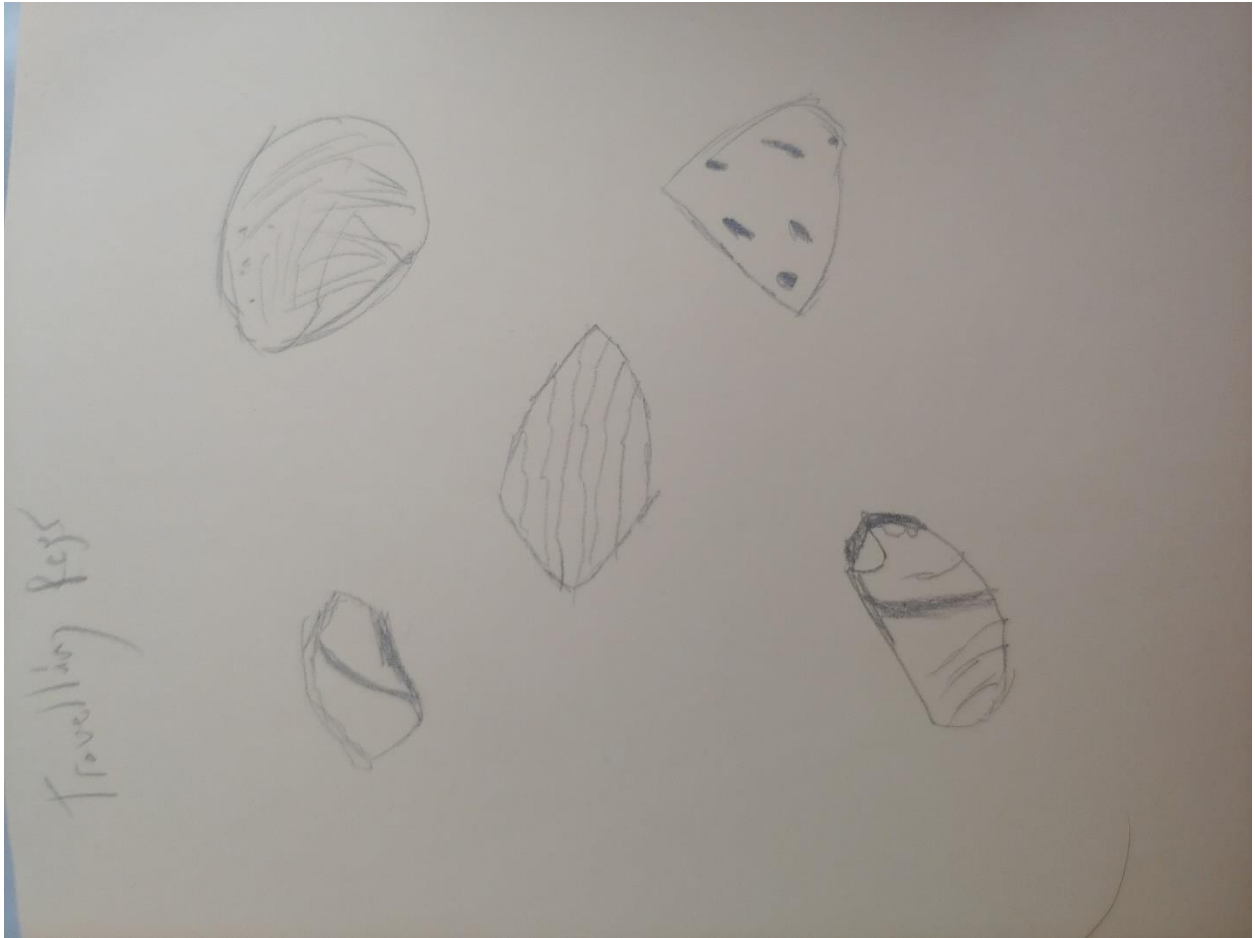


Figure A. 3

Travelling key sketches

APPENDIX B. MODELS OF THE CIRCLES

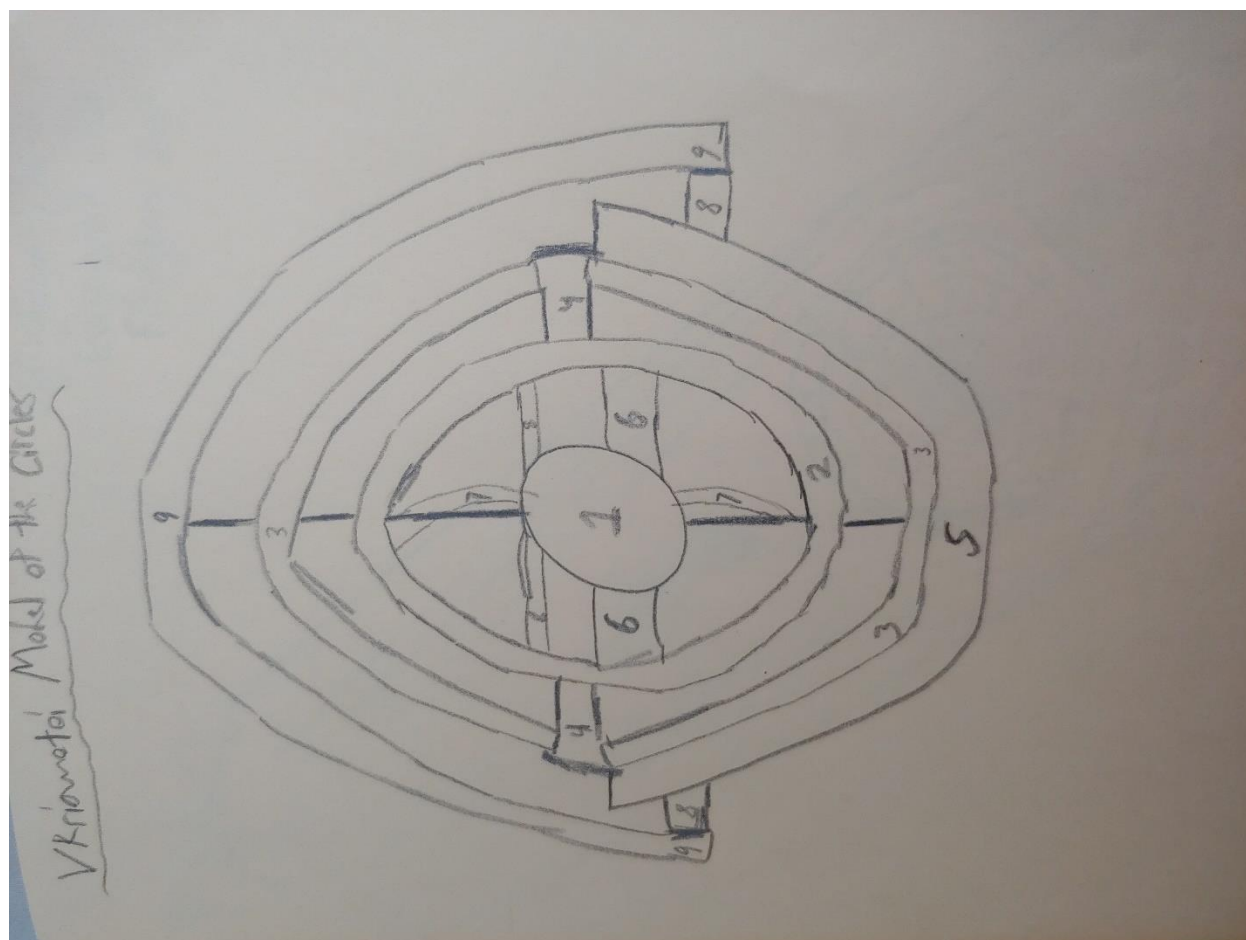


Figure B. 1

Celestial Skeleton Model

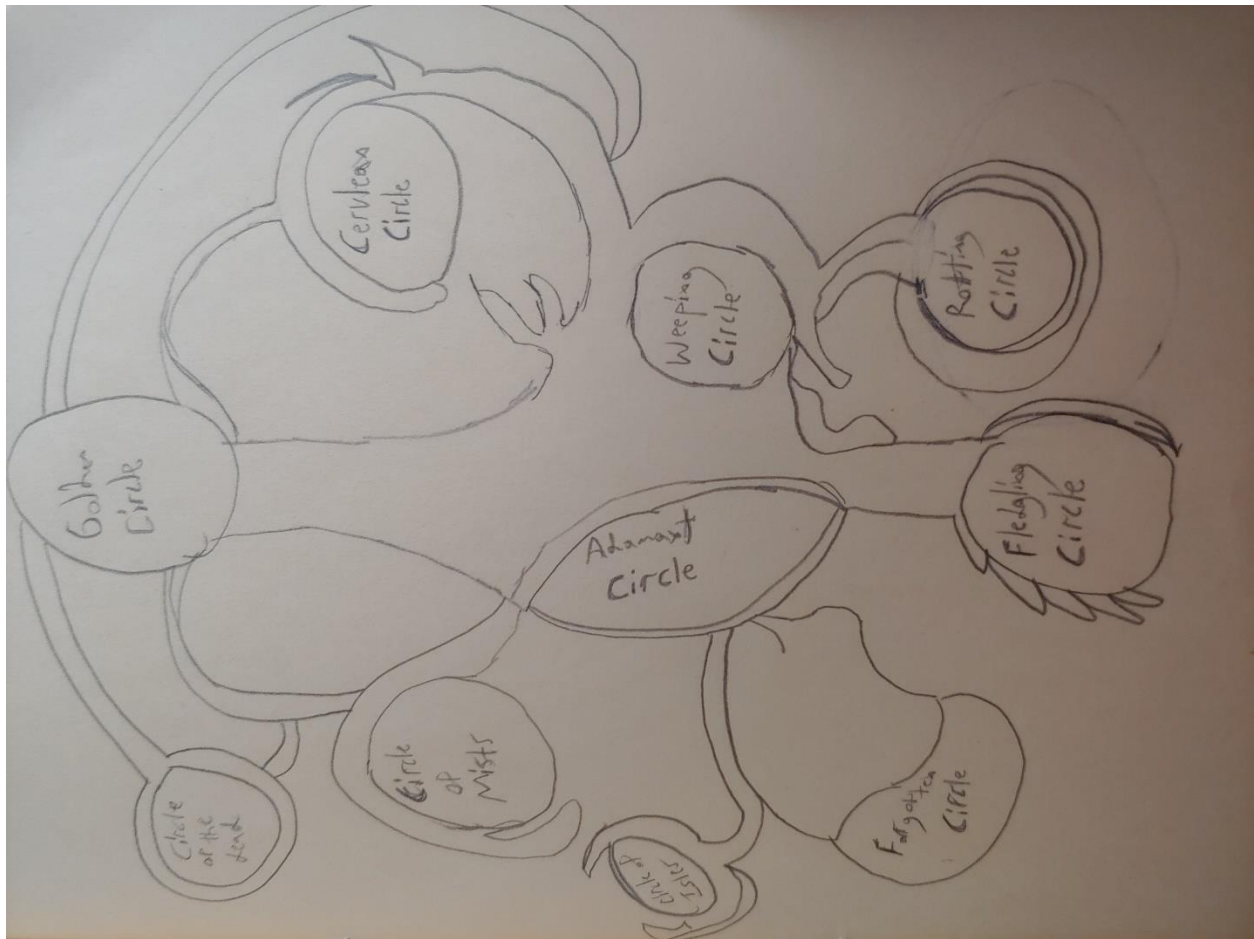


Fig. B. 2

Common Nest Model of the Circles

APPENDIX C. LANGUAGES AND TERMINOLOGY OF THE CIRCLES

Acolyte: Firstborn acolytes are Firstborn assistants often found in Firstborn temple embassies.

Due to their avian nature the Firstborn have physical limits and the acolytes are often a way to transcend these limits by translating for them and performing acts they are not physically capable of. Some are specialized for different purposes others work as general assistants.

Benefactor: Essentially a shadow governor for a given universe. Rarely seen, but often manipulates the governments in place and has final say over Firstborn presence/goals in a given Circle.

Bloodborne: A strange race of creatures, seemingly sentient blood with the power to kill and consume all they touch

Celestial Skeleton: A model of the multiverse used for travelling and Engraver purposes.

Circle: The terminology for a universe, originating from the belief that the universes surround each other like circles. A way for travelers to consistently label and discuss universes from one to another.

Collector: A variety of instruments used to capture and store the Song for use across extended amounts of time. They may be small and handheld or large enough to fill an entire room. Size and model usually depends on the amount of storage needed and storage purposes.

Currency: A standardized system provided by the Firstborn to make trading across universes more conducive. Comprises of three denominations; killi, nia and rin. 9 rin to a nia, 9 nia to a killi.

Dissonance: The experience of a mind/soul trying to grapple with its existence across multiple realities through counterparts. Occurs when a person travels to a universe encountering their counterpart. Often is debilitating and can lead to irreversible changes.

Door: An inter-dimensional opening created by the Song, allows for travel between universes.

Doorhouse: A set position for Doors in a certain universe, often a stone archway. Common in Firstborn Embassies.

Engraver: A smith that creates songweavers for travelling. Engraving a shorthand for the process of engraving doorways to different universes into a songweaver for travel.

Eun stuvo ban panbara: phrase commonly used in the Kingdom of the Skies roughly meaning, "some things are out of our control"

Firstborn: An intelligent race similar in body to giant eagles. Worshippers of the Song, they discovered the first Doors and have used their intimate knowledge of the Song to spread their influence across multiple universes often in-directly colonizing universes through the spread of their religion. Due to their avian nature much of their language is unpronounceable across races and they rely on translators to communicate for them.

Fizzer/fizz: exploding balls of acid, most prominently used to fight Bloodborne by Kingdom of Skies soldiers

Navigator: A professional universe traveler, often functioning as a bit of a shepherd/tour guide for less experienced travelers.

Mirrors/Counterparts: The doppelganger to another person from another universe. The person may be drastically different or only slightly different from the “original person”.

Prevailer: A high ranking acolyte that directly assists the Benefactor

Singers: Firstborn equivalent of priests, instructors in worship of the Song

Song: (Syng-in Firstborn tongue) a strange silvery blue mist that emits an unearthly sound like singing. Its very presence seems to be an integral part of the multiverse that naturally occurs. can be used to manipulate the nature of one’s known universe or travel across the multiverse using Doors. It naturally occurs in small quantities though larger amounts can be stored by use of Collectors.

Songpost: A matter of very quickly sending letters across universes utilizing the Song.

Songweavers/Syngfawov: metal gloves created to harness the Song’s power for various purposes; building, wounding, healing, traveling across universes.

Squealer: A weapon that acts similar to a crossbow, propels fizzers towards enemies. Given its name for the high pitched squeal that occurs when it releases its ammunition.

Sworn Shields: Standing army of the Kingdom of the Skies

The Cloud: Seemingly an enormous reserve of Song powerful enough to keep an entire city floating in sky. It almost seems frozen between universes, enabling unique manipulations not seen elsewhere.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Zachary James Posey was born in Bowling Green, Ohio on November 7th of 1993. He graduated from Winfield High School in West Virginia in 2012. He graduated from Marshall University in 2017 with B.A.'s in both Psychology and Creative Writing. He has been a Teaching Assistant at the University of Maine for the last couple years. In 2018 he presented at the Maine Council for English Language Arts his work involving, ““Creating and Enacting Curriculum Practices that Engage and Represent Non-Binary Gendered Students” a presentation upon pedagogical practices to promote inclusivity of transgender and non-binary individuals in the classroom. He is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in May 2019.