



## CHAPTER 1

# KIBURE

**K**IBURE SAT UP, RUBBED HIS face with his hands, then rose to his feet, frustrated that he could no longer sleep. The glow of the two moons illuminated the room enough for Kibure to see his way to the door of his slave hut. He tiptoed carefully to avoid waking the others who claimed their own crammed spaces along the floor; he would have hell to pay if he caused a disturbance that woke one of the elders in his hut.

Pushing gently, he cringed in anticipation of the squeak that, surprisingly, didn't come. *When did they oil that hinge?*

As Kibure stepped out into the night air, he noticed another oddity. The light he saw coming from the moons was, of course, limited; but even that partial lighting lacked the slightest semblance of color. He blinked, then reached up and rubbed his eyes; something felt wrong. Confused, Kibure swallowed hard and realized how acutely dry his throat felt. *Water. I need water.* He felt his heart thump, and started toward the nearby well.

He would have to be extremely careful to avoid waking one of the overseers who lived in the cottages beside the estate. Kibure stopped when he was only halfway there. The penalty for stealing a strictly

guarded commodity like water was no less than twenty lashes, and yet he resumed his movement toward the well.

Once there, he took hold of the rope and pulled nervously, and slowly, so as to avoid causing the pulley to squeak. He looked over his shoulder as he did so, making sure he remained alone. Slowly, slowly—the rope slipped from his hand. *Noooo!*

The pail fell and Kibure scrambled to catch the line. He didn't. The heavy bucket landed with a—silent—nothing. No sound whatsoever. Kibure looked from side to side, then leaned over the well. Something was very wrong here. Then it hit him like a lash to the back: his breathing, heavy as it was, made no sound, the door had made no sound, even his footfalls had been silent. He brought his hands up and clutched his ears. What was wrong with him? He turned and ran back to the slave shack as fast as his twelve-year-old legs would take him, his fear of retribution from the other slaves gone.

He threw open the door and ran to the closest thing he had to a mother, Berta, then stopped just before her bed. It was empty. Scanning the room, he recognized that he was completely alone; there was not a single soul in the room. He fell to his knees, closed his eyes, and cried out; only his cry was as silent as the pail of water at the bottom of the well.

Kibure shook as he knelt on the ground, uncomprehending and afraid. When he opened his eyes again, his vision was blurred by tears. He gasped; a rush of sensations returned, primary among them sound, and the sound was him screaming. But he was no longer kneeling, he was on his back staring up at the ceiling. So satisfied was he to hear his voice that the hand gripping him had almost no effect. Then a second hand slapped him, and he quieted.

“Kibure! What's wrong?” whispered Parvel, trying to cover Kibure's mouth with a hand. Parvel, who slept beside him, was a few years older, and much bigger. Kibure's face grew warm where he had been hit. He didn't care.

“I—I—” What could he say: *I was walking around outside and tried to steal water when I realized I was seeing no color and hearing no sound?* Parvel would think him mad. *Maybe I am.*

“I think I—” Understanding dawned on him. “I think I had a bad dream. I’m—sorry.”

Grumbles sounded throughout the shack and Kibure did not dare move or speak again for the rest of the night. Neither did he dare return to sleep.



Kibure’s concern over his nightmare faded with the resumption of labor the following day. It was difficult to worry about much of anything once back in the familiar monotony of exhaustion and routine. After a brief lunch, Kibure started back at his work, cutting the heavy, greenish-red drogal fruit from the stalk with the dull wooden tool barely sharp enough to do the job. He fell into a familiar rhythm of work and song:

*Toil, toil, in the field,  
To Klerós we are bound,  
Cut—THWACK—  
Cut—THWACK—  
The thin spot, don’t bruise the drogal,  
Crack, crack, goes the whip,  
Pick up the pace,  
Cut—THWACK—  
Cut—THWACK—  
The thin spot, don’t bruise the—*

“Hey, what I tell you about that rippin’ singsong stuff?”

Kibure looked up to see Jarlax, a crotchety old slave, just a few trees away. “Sorry.”

The slave shook his head. “Yeah, always sorry, but still always singin’. Just shut it, already!”

The other slave returned to his work, mumbling under his breath. Kibure resigned himself to labor the rest of the afternoon in silence, *mostly*. He hummed the tune loud enough for only his ears. As the day progressed, Kibure worked his way along the edge of the field, away from the others, filling his bag with fruit ahead of schedule for once. He carried his bag to the next tree and set it down with a satisfying thump. The bag, nearly full as it was, caused him to lose his balance in the process.

Kibure landed atop the bag, then slid down to the ground and rolled over so his back leaned against the bag of hard fruit. Sitting there, he let out a loud, satisfying breath, then he yawned and his eyelids drooped, pulled down as if by some unseen force. *Should stand up before I—*

He did not stand up.

Pain exploded across his thighs and Kibure's eyes snapped open, his heart instantly pounding as if he had just sprinted full across the field.

"Sleeping on the job, are we?" Musco Zagreb's thick, full-figured body towered over Kibure's lounging, diminutive form.

Kibure could feel the burning heat where the whip had lashed his skin. There would be a welt, and perhaps a few spots of blood. He didn't dare look. He also dared not speak for fear that whatever he said might make things worse.

Zagreb shouted gruffly, "Up! Now! You know the penalty, and that first one don't count."

Kibure did know the penalty. Fifteen lashes—no small sum where Zagreb's heavy-handedness was concerned. But Kibure rose to accept the judgment. He had no excuse, and Zagreb would have heard none, anyhow.

Kibure removed his tattered shirt.

Zagreb did not waste a moment, and Kibure shuddered as the rough whip sliced his scarred back. Kibure bit his lip to keep from screaming, knowing that Musco Zagreb believed silence a penance, a revered act for a slave. Kibure remained in fixed a standing position for the next ten lashes. But with such effort fixated on keeping quiet, he faltered.

An attempt to regain his footing failed as another crack of the whip reopened old wounds.

His face crashed into the sand. *Now I've done it.*

His weakness would only serve to ignite Musco Zagreb's rage. The whip struck again.

"Don't count if you on the ground!"

Kibure worked shaky muscles, urging them to cooperate with his will, and managed to secure a kneeling position. He paused as he spotted a boy his age, one of Zagreb's children, a true-blood. The boy was cutting away at weeds with a stick along the wall of the estate.

*Freedom*, thought Kibure as he spat jealously. It was almost unfathomable, and still he tried to imagine it, wondering at escape, though he had no idea where he might go. As far as he knew, there were no free-folk within the Lugiense Empire besides those of the true-bloods. Kibure imagined a faraway land where everyone smiled and no one used whips. Could such a place truly exist? He shook his head. He wouldn't survive more than a few days alone.

The next blow returned Kibure to the sandy soil, and the present. His back became a cauldron boiling over with pain. Kibure turned back to his musco, eyes pleading him to stop, but he knew the man wasn't finished. A slave's weakness was defiance. His musco raised the whip even higher. Just as he readied to strike, a flash of movement above caught Kibure's attention, followed by a thick white substance, which suddenly oozed down Zagreb's face. If the man's previous expression had been one of contempt, this new one was pure malice. The man wiped his face, then looked at his hand, recognizing the pungent white goo for what it was. He turned his attention to the sky. Kibure breathed a sigh of relief. His master's anger had been redirected. This might just allow Kibure a chance to rise again and return to work, forgotten.

Zagreb scanned the sky where the flying lemur, a raaven, circled, cooing and cawing its approval at having hit its target.

*Slowly, now. Yes. Still distracted.* Kibure slowly crept beyond reach. *Yes, that's it.*

"Blast you!"

Kibure froze. *Oh no.*

“Dagnammit, you baggin’ winged rat!”

Kibure blew out the breath he had been holding. *He’s not talking to me. Keep moving.*

“When I get my hands on you, I’m gonna break every rippin’ bone in your body, then leave you strung to a post to rot! You maggot-laying, roach-infested, flying little grumpkin!”

Kibure was surprised at the creativity of Zagreb’s insults while the raaven disappeared beyond the walls of the estate. But he was mostly just glad to no longer be the object of Zagreb’s ire.

The young slave watched out of the corner of his eye as the winged, black lemur drifted out of sight, jealous of its freedom to come and go, something Kibure the slave would never know. He smiled nonetheless, imagining himself soaring through the sky, teasing the wicked, like Zagreb, just for the fun of it.

The raaven had been a fixture of the estate for as long as Kibure could remember, stealing whips and other tools as well as getting into the food stores. It was no secret that Zagreb hated the thing.

The slave master mumbled as he wiped the slimy, white substance from his brow with the rag he carried at his waist to dab away sweat. Then he turned back and spotted Kibure, who froze at the man’s stare.

“Thought I’d forget on account of your little friend’s distraction, did you? Come on back here,” he barked. “We need to finish your punishment, else you’ll never learn.”

Kibure felt blood running down his back from the most recent gashes. He returned to stand before his master.

“Only thing I forgot was where I left off.” Zagreb grinned. “Guess I’ll have to start over.”

“Twelve while standing, sixteen altogether,” said Kibure without looking up.

“What’s that, now?”

“Struck me twelve times while standing, and another four while on the ground.”

Zagreb tilted his head. “You trying to be smart, but it’s coming off real stupid. Gonna be twenty for you now. Any more numbers you wanna say?”

He lifted the whip to strike, not seeming to care that Kibure was still facing him. He swung, the whip taking Kibure full in the chest. This time he did cry out. And by the time the second strike came, Kibure had turned his back, his chest stinging intensely. But there was something else, too. Feelings Kibure didn’t even know existed bubbled to the surface of his consciousness and poured through his veins. And not just feelings.

*Something* was happening to him.

He set his jaw as another connection was made between the leather whip and his bare back. Kibure stood more upright, teeming with alien emotion, and *something* more. Zagreb paused, confused by the change in posture.

Another sense awakened in Kibure, a sense of certainty, and a sense of—defiance. Kibure squeezed his eyes shut. *No! No more.*

He felt himself straighten completely. Then he opened his eyes, slowly, resigned to allow his emotions to take control. His mind pulled away. He did not try to stop it. His body went numb, replaced by a deeper, nearly overwhelming sensation, as if he were suddenly connected to every particle of orange soil beneath his bare feet.

An instinctual awareness overwhelmed him and his body became an unfathomable vessel, acting of its own accord. *I’m going to do something very bad.* He shook his head again. *What do I care? I have nothing to lose.* He turned to face his master, who raised the whip to deliver another blow. Kibure’s body quickly closed the gap between himself and his master. Time seemed to bend as he moved, the seconds becoming hours, nothing going unnoticed. He saw the whites of Zagreb’s teeth as his grin became a snarl. He saw the dirt beneath Zagreb’s nails as he gripped the handle of injustice, preparing his swing. The man appeared still unconcerned about the frail slave who flowed toward him.

Kibure could hardly believe what he was doing. He narrowed his eyes and drew back his fist. Considering his small, slight stature, it was a vain attempt, but he was done caring.

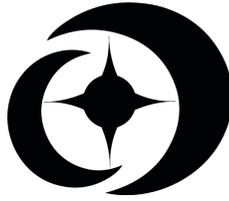
His arm swung to strike the much larger, much stronger man, who looked down at him bemused. Zagreb's inevitable retribution would come later, Kibure knew. But with shocking speed, Kibure's fist moved toward the target, Zagreb's chest.

A wave of heat washed over Kibure as his fist continued forward. But as his closed fingers approached Zagreb's body, a surge of—*something*—pure energy?—shot out from that very same fist. The strike never directly contacted Zagreb's body, but the energy sent the slave master hurtling fifteen paces through the air. Zagreb's scream radiated both shock and pain as the air was forced from his lungs. Then he slammed into the hard desert floor. Displaced dust floated into the air around his body.

All was still and for a moment, Kibure thought he had killed the man. He let out a breath when Zagreb groaned and rolled to his stomach, calling to the overseers for help.

Kibure stood there somehow buried to his calves in the rock-hard sand, which had become more like overripe drogal fruit, thick, mushy, and malleable. He pulled his legs free then fell to his knees. That was where he remained until two of Zagreb's true-blood overseers approached cautiously from either side to take hold of him. Kibure spotted Zagreb a safe distance away, holding his chest, hatred oozing from his expression.

The men secured the shackles slowly, hesitantly, but Kibure did not resist; he couldn't. Whatever otherworldly power had come over him in those moments of passion had fled his body the second he realized what he had done.



## CHAPTER 2

# GROBENNAR

**G**ROBENNAR'S EYES FLEW OPEN AS a loud boom rattled his bed-chamber, rousing him from sleep. He immediately drew on the powers of his god, Klerós, prepared to vanquish the source of the disturbance. Then it came again: *THUMP-THUMP-THUMP*.

He sighed and relaxed, extinguishing his god's magic as he rose from the bed. Just a messenger. "Coming."

Grobennar instinctively snatched up the red-ruby pendant on his way to the door.

*"Ooooh my. A missive so early in the morning? Whatever could this be?"* came the familiar haunting voice in Grobennar's head, from the spirit trapped within the pendant, Jaween.

"I suspect we'll learn shortly." He shook out stiff limbs as he approached, rubbed his still sleepy face, then pulled open the door.

A palace soldier stood at attention, waiting respectfully for Grobennar to speak.

"Yes?"

The soldier gave a dutiful bow, face nearly touching the stone floor, and rightfully so in the presence of the High Priest. "The Lord King wishes to see you in his chambers at once, Your Grace."

Grobennar glanced out his bedroom window to confirm that it was indeed still dark outside. *A summons before dawn?*

Turning back to acknowledge the soldier, Grobennar grumbled, "Very well."

He strode across the room to his chest to retrieve a suitable robe, the one with the yellow embroidery, a subtle reminder of his position as Fatu Mazi, greatest among the priesthood. The God-king knew this, of course, but as his spiritual leader, Grobennar felt it necessary to always model perfected etiquette. The Lord ruler's endowed magical abilities were frighteningly powerful, but he lacked any feel for the formalities that came with leading the Empire. He had grown increasingly defiant in recent months, and Grobennar had resorted to simpler, indirect teachings through example.

*"With the God-king's indignant mood as of late, perhaps it would be wise to stop at the kitchen for a pastry? Humans like pastries."*

"Quiet," hissed Grobennar.

*"Fine. Fine. I'm only trying to help. You know how much I like to be helpful."*

Grobennar scurried down the narrow corridor toward the God-king's chambers, still dark but for the mystic flicker of red flames on either end. Grobennar's joints had shrugged off the stiffness that came with his thirty-seven years by the time he reached the guards outside the chambers.

The two men bowed deeply, then opened the massive oak doors to Magog's bedchamber, their expressions intense as they regained their positions at attention, prepared to dispatch unwelcome guests.

Grobennar entered and saw Magog seated at the edge of the bed, his bronze skin shaped by an imposing muscular body, shimmering with sweat, nude from the waist up. The God-king's long translucent hair hung wildly about his head, taking on the color of the flames around the room.

Grobennar bowed with minimal reverence, then continued his approach to stand before his Lord. "You requested my presence, Lord Magog?"

Magog's topaz eyes became narrow slits. They were surrounded by an increasing number of red scale-like growths mostly around his left eye, though a few had started around the right. These scales, reminders of his unusual birth and his growing power, were disconcerting and comforting at once.

He said, "I observed the crescent and the full moons crossing Lesante's gift this night."

Grobennar understood the implications of such signs. The founder of their faith, the last prophet, and her seers had foretold the Renewal, a purge of the unsaved world through force. This sign was said to mark the beginning. The crescent moon crossing its smaller counterpart at the center of the most well-known constellation was representative of the Lugienese Empire stretching their dominion to the ends of the world.

"You are certain of this?" asked Grobennar, skeptical as always. This astrological occurrence had been observed before, but the scholars had dismissed it, believing the location in the stars not centered enough within Lesante's gift to pass scrutiny.

Magog let out a breath of frustration. "Of course I am certain. The enemy has stirred. Last night I felt a presence, a *wrongness*. It was faint, but combined with these signs, the truth cannot be ignored."

Grobennar did not like the sound of this, for he had sensed nothing. "How can you be certain of what you felt? Perhaps your stomach simply did not agree with your evening meal."

Magog's frustration leaked through his voice. "I am certain! The Dark Lord's agent stirs; it is time to act!" He glared at Grobennar, daring him to disagree.

Grobennar knew better, yet the idea of rash action did not sit well with him. He was a believer. After having seen Magog's birth with his own eyes, how could he not be? And yet, these prophecies had been twisted over the years to fit situations that later proved imprudent. Grobennar remained straight-backed, knowing the importance of posture in projecting the credibility of his advice, something Magog had been less inclined to accept as of late.

“You are right to be prepared with the knowledge of the prophecies. You are, after all, the prophesied redeemer. Yet do these very same prophecies not speak of caution? Do they not speak of the importance of our preparations? I do not doubt your sincerity, of course, but perha—”

The words died in his throat as he felt the tingling sensation of magic, Magog’s magic.

*He wouldn’t dare, I’m his—*

A wave of power struck Grobennar like a line of fists and he careened into the stone wall across the room. The impact knocked his wind out.

Magog’s booming voice followed—“I am done waiting! I am the God-king!”—penetrating deep into Grobennar’s throbbing head.

Grobennar coughed and sucked in a deep breath of air. He crawled to his knees, angry at being attacked by the boy he had raised and trained from infancy. He began to rise to his feet.

“How dare you! I am your—”

Another blast of energy split the air. Grobennar used his own powers to deflect the blow, but the sheer volume of energy was too great and he was still thrown back into the wall again. He landed with a thud, then groaned.

“You are my servant!” Magog’s voice became a growl. “I am not yours to command. You have forgotten your place.”

Never before had Magog lashed out like this. His powers were as of yet still manifesting, still growing, but already he commanded strength unknown to any mortal man. Magog could easily kill him if he wished, and Grobennar now feared that in his anger, he just might. He forgot the physical pain of the attack on his body, and the great blow to his ego.

“I—I am sorry, My Lord.”

The voice in Grobennar’s mind interrupted his already strained thoughts. “*You’re not alone with the God-king. I sense the life-essence of another; a wielder.*”

Grobennar collected himself and rose, forgetting the danger posed by the unpredictably obstinate God-king. It was still Grobennar’s duty to serve and protect. Perhaps the God-king was right about the coming

of the Dark Lord's agent. Grobennar drew in Klerós's power. Then he spotted movement to his right. He summoned more, ready to strike—

“What are—how dare you!” Magog yelled.

Grobennar ignored the oblivious Emperor as a form materialized from the shadows cast by ceiling-high drapes in the corner of the room. Grobennar shouted, “Get down!”

Grobennar extended a hand, readying to strike. Just before he released a bolt of searing energy, the shadowy shape stepped into the light and spoke. Grobennar recognized the voice with revulsion, relaxing his magic with reluctance.

*Mazi Rajuban.* A member of the High Council and long-standing opponent of both Grobennar and his more conservative faction within the Council. “Peace, brother. I was asked by the God-king to be in attendance for today's meeting.”

Jaween spoke into Grobennar's mind, “*Have I mentioned that I do not care for this man?*”

*Nor do I*, thought Grobennar wryly to himself.

His own anger reignited. *That's what Rajuban wishes.* Grobennar forced himself to relent. “Of course. The God-king is wise to seek the wisdom of a member of the High Council. Yet perhaps this is a matter for the collective wisdom of the High Council to discuss in its entirety.”

The God-king bellowed, “The High Council is fickle, paralytic, and incapable of action!” Lowering his voice, he added, “You are right about assembling the Council. But it will not be to initiate discourse. You will *inform* them.” He raised his voice once more. “You will inform them that the time has at long last come to begin preparations for the Purge. The enemy stirs! We too must shed our idle position.”

Grobennar knew better than to disagree. He had somehow lost favor with the God-king, and Rajuban's attendance here served as an answer to the question of how.

“Yes, Lord. It shall be done.”

Rajuban smiled. “You are wise to see the wisdom of the God-king's words. He has been tightly leashed for far too long. The time has come for him to realize his true destiny as avatar to Klerós, praise be his name.”

*“Oh he’s good. I can’t help but hate him, but his politics are praiseworthy. Perhaps we might torture and kill him later?”*

Grobennar ignored Jaween, instead looking to Magog, nodding. The decision had been made. Rajuban had defeated him in this bout.

“Of course. This is well. Klerós guide the both of you.”

That *snake* had maneuvered behind his back to gain the ear of the God-king. He would need to tread very carefully.

Grobennar bade the God-king farewell, refusing to acknowledge Rajuban, then stalked out of the room as quickly as possible. He considered his next course of action, though there wasn’t much to consider. He had no choice but to call a full assembly as instructed.

Grobennar entered his own chambers and melted into the chair beside his bed, mentally exhausted.

*“So. This purge. That means war, right? I will be able to persuade our enemies?”*

Grobennar picked up a quill and ink from the small table to his left to begin writing out a list of preparations. “Yes, the Purge means war. I suspect you’ll have plenty of chances to persuade, you might even see some killing.”

*“Ooh-ooh-ooh. Yes, persuading and killing! I know your mood is a touch soured from earlier, but this really does call for celebration. A small feast, perhaps? That might lighten your mood, as well.”*

Grobennar ignored Jaween.

*“Did you write that down?”*

Grobennar continued to work on his list.

*“Are you ignoring me again? You know it hurts my feelings when you ignore me.”*

Grobennar reached up and removed the pendant from his neck and tossed it onto his bed a few paces away, limiting the strength of the spirit’s connection to him. “I need to think,” he said through clenched teeth.

He wondered if perhaps secreting the forbidden spirit from the debris all those years ago had resulted in more trouble than it was worth. He heard a sound in his head that was disturbingly not like weeping,

yet he knew from his time with Jaween that this was precisely what the spirit was intending to communicate.

He sighed. "I'm not ignoring you, Jaween. You can stop the crying. I just need it quiet in order to think."

Jaween's mood elevated. "*So that sounded like real crying this time, didn't it?*"

Grobennar rolled his eyes. "Closer than ever before."

It was going to be a very long day.



## CHAPTER 3

# AYNWARD

**T**HERE. THAT'S THE LAST OF it," Aynward said to his servants as they finished packing up his things for the long journey.

"Make sure you put my dice somewhere I will not need to dig for hours to find. I suspect I'll have need of them the moment I hit shore. In fact, wait." His gaze went to the ceiling with the quick thought. "Put them in my satchel. Perhaps I'll be able to coerce a ship-hand to play at chances with me along the way."

Aynward's only sister rolled her eyes at the youngest of six, fifth in line to the throne of Dowe, the most prosperous, arguably most powerful, kingdom on the continent of Drogen.

"Truly? You can't go a few weeks without dicing? Do you honestly believe the voyage will be so terrible?"

"I'm to be stuck on a ship with Counselor Dolme, no friends, and likely very little ale to top it. Gods know he'll try to stifle any and all attempts at fun along the way. So yes, it will indeed be quite terrible."

This time Dagmara's fluttering eye roll was accompanied by an exasperated sigh at her younger brother. "You're far too critical of the man. Considering your . . . appetite for foolishness. It's a wonder he hasn't

lashed you far more than he has. If anything, you owe him your thanks for how much he's shielded you from Father's wrath."

Aynward waved away the comment with a hand.

"No, seriously. Consider last high harvest. You and Fronklin were found, gods only know how, passed out on the south square stage, clothed like jesters, with empty bottles of apple brandy in your hands!"

Aynward acknowledged that story with a grunt, and his head hurt at the mention of apple anything.

"Well? Did Dolme make Father aware of this little mishap?" She answered his silence for him. "No. He made you repay the spirit holder from whom you'd stolen it, and scrub the stage for a week, but he didn't rat on you to Father as he probably should have. He really does mean you well, Aynward. It's just that you don't always seem to mean well for yourself. You're your own worst enemy much of the time."

With an edge to his voice, he replied, "This coming from the girl who secretly learns of the sword, a crime punishable by no less than fifty lashes if discovered. Not that Father would ever see the punishment through on his one and only little princess." He snickered.

She narrowed her eyes. "That's totally different and you know it! There's actually a practical use for that."

"Yeah. I'm sure your talents with the sword will really come in handy the next time you need to cut your way through a contingent of sworn Kingdom guards in order to escape the perils of the palace. Oh wait . . ."

Dagmara stammered then let out a cry of frustration. "You're impossible!"

Aynward laughed slightly then relented. "Listen. I'm all for it. If I wasn't, I'd not have endangered myself by indulging this *interest* of yours in the first place. In fact, if anyone were to receive your fifty lashes, it would be me for teaching you. All I'm saying is that you don't get to sit all high and mighty while you cast judgment on my choices. I've just celebrated my sixteenth name day so in accordance with Kingdom law, I've been a man for three years. You may be two years older but, according to this same law, you just took womanhood only two moons past. If anything, it should be *me* giving *you* advice on life."

Dagmara took in a deep breath and opened her mouth, then breathed out a long sigh in disappointed consideration. “For one thing, I can’t even believe you’d use such a vapid argument as Kingdom custom to justify one’s ability to make sound judgment. Wasn’t logic supposed to be one of your strong suits? Oh yeah, that’s right, you dazzle people with your snide language to make up what you lack for in validity. Nice trick, but you’ve not fooled me.”

Aynward started a retort but she cut him off. “Secondly, I think perhaps you and Tecuix might need a little reconciliation as far as the nature of this *enjoyment* you speak.” She immediately pointed to her heart and then the heavens, a ritualistic show of deference at the mention of Tecuix. She continued, “Our Creator’s word is very clear about the overindulgence of fermented beverages—or *any* abuse of intoxicants, for that matter.”

Her referral to the Creator in such an even tone, with such nonchalance, placed Aynward teetering between fury and laughter. She spoke as if Tecuix actually cared about the goings-on of anyone, and furthermore, as if she’d be the one to know if he did. Like speaking of an old friend. Aynward sometimes forgot how *religious* she was. Not that he wasn’t religious, per se. He just wasn’t quite so devout as she, or most others.

He realized she was waiting for a response. “Um—well—I’m just trying to keep all the gods happy. Tecuix gets praise enough. I’m a little more humanitarian in my respect for the gods. I feel like good ol’ Kitay doesn’t get enough appreciation, and Kitay and I seem to connect on a much more intimate level with a few mugs of ale between us.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure the Goddess of Luck truly appreciates your drunken patronage.”

*She won’t even give the Goddess of Luck her due respect of name.* Dagmara was real elitist when it came to worshiping the gods. She really was intolerable sometimes. Yet his heart sank as his mind snapped back to his impending departure. No matter their differences, he’d miss his sister. Their witty squabbles most of all.

But good-byes wouldn't get any easier the longer he waited. A clean break was always best.

"Dagmara, I must be off to say my official farewells to Mother and Father."

"Tonight? So early?" She gave him a puzzled look.

"Well, with such an early morning exodus, I plan to sleep onboard the vessel this evening. I'd hate to keep the ship waiting, you know, in case I oversleep or the servants forget to wake me. You never can trust these things. Or what if some illness befalls me, and travel to the harbor becomes difficult? This way I'll already be there when I wake, floating gently down the river. Father would send someone to lash me if he ever caught wind that I delayed our departure."

Dagmara eyed him for a moment, suspicion on her face, then looked down as if she'd accepted his story. A few seconds passed, then her gaze shot back up to meet his, skin tightening around the edges of her eyes. "You! You little rat. You're going out tonight, aren't you? One last hurrah before you go. You don't care about getting to the ship on time, you just don't want to have to see Father early in the morning after a night on the rampage. Figure you can just stumble onto the ship tonight, or in the wee hours of the morning, rather, and pass out there? That it?"

His stoic card face shattered, replaced by a wide grin. "You make it sound so much worse when you put it like that, sister."

"Aynward Dowe! You had better not. Tecuix bless us all, please tell me this is a joke."

"Gods above, you speak like I'm planning to do murder. I'm just going out to have some fun with my friends on my last night in Salmune. I won't see them for at least two years. And by then we'll all have *responsibilities* and *expectations* to uphold."

She spoke almost to herself. "Dolme's right, some babes just can't learn to stay away from a hot pan without first burning themselves on the iron."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing. Just something Dolme said." She sighed. "I'll leave you to the rest of your good-byes."

*Why has she been talking to Dolme? Well, never mind that.*

She stepped forward and opened her arms for a hug and he did the same, taking a tight hold of his sister. It lasted only a few moments, but the sincerity of her embrace melted away his sarcastic facade, if only temporarily. They separated and stood quietly, looking out at the view from his bedroom's vast balcony, which overlooked the harbor of Lake Salmune. In the distance he spotted one of the two Lumáles quartered here in the capital city.

The flighted animal was distant, but he could still make out the long neck, wide wings, and the even longer tail of the creature that made it obvious to any studied person, that this was no bird. They were indeed regal animals of beauty.

Aynward noticed Dagmara's fixation on the Lumále and knew she was dreaming of a place closer to the line of succession. She had often spoken of her dream to ride the majestic flying creatures. However, only the coronated king and his heir were permitted to travel to the home of the nearly-extinct Lumáles, the home of the Tal-Don line. A Lumále could only be ridden with permission and training from the Tal-Don riders, an ancient family predating Grojen Dowe's Rebellion. It was part of the heir's duty to be trained in the ways of war upon a Lumále's back.

The entire arrangement placed too much trust in a distant, unrelated family for Aynward's comfort, but the Tal-Dons had proven themselves loyal time and again. As recently as eighty years ago, when the Kingdom of Kael had crossed the river to claim North Halesmer for their own, Aynward's great-grandfather rode into battle atop a Lumále, supported by Tal-Don riders to crush the attack.

Dagmara had joked about marrying a Tal-Don in hopes of eventually persuading him to let her ride just once. That had been before her engagement to the Scritlandian prince was announced. She'd never spoken of such things since. But while Dagmara's hope to ride a Lumále might have been a child's impossible dream, it was one she continued to silently covet. The unusual sighting served instead as a reminder of yet one more chasm she would never span. She turned to Aynward,

blinking away the moisture in her eyes, and said, “Be careful tonight and while you’re away.”

“I always am.” He grinned, the seriousness of the moment vanishing in an instant.

She did not return his gleeful smirk. “I’ll miss you, brother.”

“I’ll miss you, too. Now stop getting all sappy on me.”

They stepped apart and she nodded, wiping away the tear that had formed at the crease of her eye, embarrassed.

“Balance centered,” he said, assuming a swordsman’s stance. She mirrored his position. Their eyes met only briefly before she turned and left the room. Nothing more needed to be said.



## CHAPTER 4

# KIBURE

**K**IBURE WOKE TO A DULL ache throughout his entire body. He couldn't think about anything else for the first few moments, until his thoughts ventured back toward the day before: the feat of unexplainable power he had displayed. Could that have been a nightmare like the one the night before? Both were troubling in their own right, but the two combined? *Insane*. And yet, as he lifted a hand to rub his eyes, the shackles on his wrists were harsh evidence that he had not been dreaming after all.

Musco Zagreb's angry voice pierced Kibure's musings. "You idiots didn't gag him?"

A higher-pitched voice from behind him replied, "Gag? Were we supposed to?"

"Yes! He's a rippin' tazamine! Nearly killed me! You want him doing his—his *magic* on you?" He spat the word *magic* as if it was poison in his mouth.

"Oh. Guess I—uh—didn't think about that."

*He wants to gag me?*

“Well, stop standing there and do it!” shouted Zagreb. “And double-check that his wrists are locked tight. Can’t be too careful with tazamines and the like.”

Kibure could hardly believe the title given him. Tazamines were demons of the night that emerged from the Dark Lord’s underworld to kidnap naughty children who opposed the will of the great god Klerós, or so the stories went. These children would be punished and turned into tazamines, twisted weapons of evil, forced to do the Dark Lord’s bidding. *I’m no tazamine! I didn’t mean—I didn’t know what I was doing!*

Some of Kibure’s fight returned as the man pulled a rag from a pocket, but Kibure was far too weak, especially with his wrists bound. He stammered, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—I swear I’m no tazam—” The rag stifled his plea as it was shoved into his mouth and a rope was tied around his head to secure it.

Zagreb instructed one of the overseers, Archben, to bring Kibure along as he stomped toward an equipment shed near the fence. “We’re just gonna have to leave him caged ’til I figure what’s to be done with him. I’ll be leaving immediately for town. I’ve an acquaintance who may be able to help.”

After being dragged by the chains that linked his wrists, Kibure was forced into a cage meant for some other purpose. It was tall enough for him to sit upright, but not wide enough to lie down. To his relief, he was able to fit his feet between the bars, allowing him to at least extend his legs instead of remaining indefinitely huddled.

“Don’t you go anywhere near this *thing* ’til I get back,” Zagreb ordered his men. “And don’t you go thinkin’ he needs water or food. Serves him right after what he just done. Should probably just lop his head off to be safe, only I hate throwin’ away coin if there’s some to be had.” His voice trailed off into the growing evening gloom.

Alone and forced to remain with his shoulders up against two metal bars with a dirty rag stuffed into his mouth, Kibure yearned for his usual place on the hard floor between the wall and the older slave, Parvel. However, the physical discomforts were the least of his concerns. What had he done? Zagreb had refused to touch him and spoke as if he were

some demon from a nighttime tale meant to scare children. Surely he was not, but how could he explain what he had done? What if this power *was* somehow linked to the Dark Lord? Perhaps he had been possessed. But the Dark Lord was said to be lured by evil deeds. Was this a punishment for his poor production in the drogag fields? Perhaps his thoughts of freedom had drawn the Dark Lord's attention. He wished he could talk to Gabriladen. She was the one who told stories before sleep. Surely she would know what this all meant. He certainly wished he had asked her about his dream before heading out to the fields yesterday. Everything had seemed too real, and his memory of it was still so vivid.

Then again, she would probably respond the same way Zagreb did should he ask such a question. His admission to unexplainable—and therefore sinister—dreams would have designated him a further outcast among outcasts. And his use of dark power—Kibure had never felt power like that before and still wondered how he had done it at all. Would he be capable of doing so again? Would he want to?



That night, Kibure hardly slept and his body continued to ache, as if from the inside out. This was not the ache of muscle, but a deeper ache. Not only did he battle physical pain, but also apprehension from the incomprehensibility of recent events.

The silence of the second day within the cage was finally broken by the familiar sound of a raaven's coo. To Kibure's astonishment, Rave landed next to his cage. The creature used his small hands to pass a piece of cactus through to him. At this point, Kibure would have eaten anything. He would also believe anything. *No, this isn't strange. It's just a raaven bringing a prisoner food. This is normal. Just like having magic explode out of my fist.* That last thought confirmed that this was most assuredly *not* normal. *But that doesn't mean I can't accept the gift.* He moved his mouth to thank Rave; the muffled sound was his reminder

of the gag. *So much for that.* The raaven had placed a piece of paradise within sight, but out of reach. A well-intentioned, albeit painful, punishment.

Rave released his own sound of frustration. Yet, never without surprises, the nimble creature clambered up to the cage and squeezed between the bars. Once inside, Rave maneuvered behind Kibure to take hold of the rope holding Kibure's gag, and began nibbling. Within a few minutes, the rope fell uselessly to the ground. *Don't bother trying to understand this. Just be thankful.* The taste of cactus fruit filled Kibure's dry mouth and he smiled. "Thank you!" he whispered to the raaven as it took to the air.

The treat didn't stave off his discomfort for long, but it did remove the fear that he might starve to death. He frowned as he considered that he was undoubtedly slated to die by much more painful means when Zagreb returned.



Kibure started from his hazy, upright slumber as the cage shook. "Curse you to hell, boy! Wake when I tell you!" Then Zagreb's eyes went wide in fear as noticed the cut rope sitting on the cage floor.

Zagreb jerked his hand away from the bars and hunkered behind a woman of perhaps twenty summers. Kibure had never seen her before. The woman stood several paces away.

She stared at Kibure as she spoke, but her words were for Zagreb. "Calm yourself, my friend. He can do us no harm, not with me here."

The Lugenese woman was thin, though much of her shape was obscured by the unembroidered gray robe she wore. She had ear-length translucent hair and yellow eyes, the telltale marks of a true-blood. Next to Zagreb, her lighter skin tone marked the only noticeable difference, yet she still had the olive coloring of the true-blood race.

"But the gag!" blurted Zagreb. "What if he whispers some sort of demon spell?"

She chuckled. “You’ve heard one too many child’s tales. Contrary to popular, if misinformed, belief, wielding magic has nothing to do with spoken words or hand gestures. Admittedly many Klerósi priests speak those words as a tool for concentration, but the words are not themselves used in the casting of spells. It’s about having oneness with the source, which, in my case, would be Klerós. In the boy’s case—well—Klerós only knows, but in any case, I suspect this boy had no idea what he was doing.”

Zagreb blanched as he processed her words. “He can do magic even with chains and gag?” Zagreb took another step back.

The woman considered. “Technically speaking, yes, but I will use a castration spell to separate him from his source of magic and you will have no more to fear.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

Zagreb eyed her expectantly, but she did nothing. “Well?” he asked.

The woman raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. “Well, I don’t work for free.” She held out a hand. “You pay, I do.”

Zagreb glared at her as he dug into his pocket. “How much?”

The woman considered this for a time before replying, “Three gold tómans should do.”

Zagreb froze, and Kibure thought he might refuse the price. Then his hand came back to life within his pocket as he retrieved a handful. “Thievery,” he snarled.

“You’re welcome to call an ordained member of the Kleról. Though I believe they would not simply castrate the boy. They would take him into custody and you would be buying a new slave, which if my estimates are off would run you somewhere closer to ten gold tómans?”

Zagreb counted out a mixture of copper, silver, and gold coins to reach the sum, then dropped the coins into her outstretched hand. “Let me know when the deed is done. I leave soon for the Eastern Markets and wish not to have a tazamine running around on my estate when I do.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “True tazamines have been all but erased from these lands.”

“Well, whatever he is, I want him dealt with. And you’ve been paid.” He turned and stalked away, leaving Kibure alone with the priestess.

She regarded him with thoughtful eyes. “My name is Sindri. What I am about to do is going to hurt, though not so much as if you had been wielding magic for a longer time. I have seen this performed on priests, and they are almost never right afterward.”

Kibure had no response. *Are these supposed to be comforting words?*

“It is best for you that your master called me. Otherwise you would be on your way to a much worse fate than this.”

*Worse than Zagreb taking retribution once I’m no longer seen as a threat?*

The hair on the back of Kibure’s neck rose and he felt a tingling sensation as Sindri extended her arm, palm out toward him. He waited expectantly, fearfully, for the wave of power that would cause him pain. Nothing happened.

Sindri eyed him curiously. “You must have quite the threshold for pain. Even pagan wielders new to their power, like yourself, nearly always show at least some sign of discomfort when their connection to their god is severed.”

Kibure just lowered his eyes and waited for her to leave. Sindri shook her head, then apparently took his hint that he did not wish to speak and she left without another word. The castration being painless was a small victory indeed. Soon enough Zagreb would be back, and things would get considerably worse for Kibure now that his musco had no reason to fear him.

As the hours rolled on, Kibure began to hope for Zagreb to show up, if only to be done with the beating, or beatings. The anticipation was unbearable. He carried this fear all the way into the setting of the sun and the return of the moons before his mind finally gave into sleep.



Kibure opened his eyes and took a moment to reacclimate himself to his new reality, confined to the too-small cage behind a shed on Zagreb's estate. He noticed the eerie silence, the lack of a breeze, and finally the muted colors, or, rather, the lack of them altogether. He breathed in deeply, nerves working him into a panic. Another nightmare? Yes—it must be. But why was he having it? It was unlike any nightmare he had experienced before. There was no villain, not that he had seen, anyway. Why then was he so afraid? Perhaps he shouldn't be.

Yet there was something strangely disturbing about the lack of color and sound that made him yearn for a scary monster and a quick death so he could just wake up. Everything about this experience was otherwise just too normal. He felt too lucid, and seemed to have all of his other faculties, including his sense of touch. He could feel the cold of the iron bars at his back leeching the warmth from his skin, and the stagnant, windless air in his mouth.

He looked around. Everything else appeared exactly as it had been while he was awake. The moons in the sky, the shadow cast by the equipment shed adjacent him. The drogal trees in the distant field remained inactive sentinels, mostly plucked of fruit in preparation for Zagreb's trip to the Eastern Markets.

Then something captured his attention. He stared hard in the direction he had been looking, toward Zagreb's estate. He blinked, trying to rule out what he saw: a ripple in the air. His eyes did not believe what they were seeing. The humanoid outline grew in size, distorting the background as it moved, while remaining simultaneously translucent. As the shape drew closer, he saw a slight wisp of something opaque, but he couldn't fully get a sense of what he was seeing. A spirit? He did know that this was not good. *Shouldn't have wished for a monster!*

The spirit-thing was almost upon him. It must be some sort of demon, come to steal his soul. He saw the outline of arms reaching for the cage.

“Noooo!” he cried, but the sound died in his mind, unable to manifest in this place. Even knowing the futility of doing so, Kibure pushed the cage with all his might. To his surprise, his body slid free of it. In an instant, he was upright looking down on the cage and the ripples of air that took on the form of a human. The human started to glow.

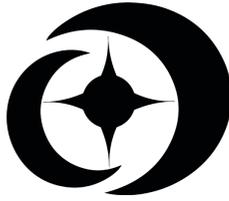
*What the—*

Kibure closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was back inside the cage, his back stinging, the sound of his panicked breathing loud in his ears. He was awake—really awake! He felt something else, too, the tingling he had felt when Sindri had been using—

Then he saw her, standing in front of the cage, staring at him, features obscured by shadow.

He felt her power envelop him, immobilizing his entire body.

Then she spoke. “Be calm. I’m not going to hurt you, but it does appear that my spell was not successful after all. You were just using magic. It seems I have finally found my tazamine.”



## CHAPTER 5

# GROBENNAR

[Twenty-Five Years Earlier]

**G**ROBENNAR ENTERED THE HOT, STEAMY room with another priest close behind. He wrinkled his nose at the acrid smell accompanying his first charge as a priest of Klerós: a whimpering woman on a bed of sweat-soaked, twisted blankets.

Behind the woman loomed an imposing figure, Baelor. Grobennar had been warned that his new employer would prove a difficult man to work for; the description did not disappoint. Baelor spared a brief glance at the newcomers, his excited expression melting into a scowl. He turned back to the woman, squeezing water from a rag to cool her forehead as he grumbled, “I asked for more priests, not more children. The Kleról must be getting desperate.”

Grobennar, a youth of just twelve summers, considered explaining the sleepless nights he had invested into his studies to earn the coveted red robes, then thought better of it. He’d been justifying himself ever since his hard-fought acceptance into the Kleról six years earlier, the youngest ever to receive such a distinction. If his experience during those years had taught him anything, it was that actions spoke louder than words.

*“Blessed cosmos, your new employer seems to have eaten something that does not agree with him.”*

Jaween seemed also to speak louder than words, insofar as Grobennar could always hear whatever the spirit had to say, regardless of whether or not he wished to hear it.

*“Should have brought that swine-sausage soup I suggested. Bribery goes a long way, especially in the priesthood.”*

Grobennar ignored the comments, as he often did.

Instead he adjusted his tight-fitting conical hat, something to which he'd still not grown accustomed, and lowered his head in deference. “How might we serve, Fatu Kazi?” He used the priest's formal title, hoping to play to the man's evident insecurities.

Fatu Kazi Baelor gave him a long, appraising look. Grobennar half thought the man would refuse him altogether. Then he scoffed, “I suspect that *you* will *serve* with great difficulty.”

*“Hmmm, perhaps more than a digestive issue. He seems to have taken a particular dislike to you. I can't imagine why. I could speak with him about this . . .”*

Grobennar coughed “No” into a hand.

Baelor continued, “What's your name, young tadi?”

“Tadi Grobennar, my dear Fatu Kazi.”

The grizzled man glanced over to the other tadi-level priest who had arrived with Grobennar.

“And you?”

“Tadi Penden, my dear Fatu Kazi.”

Penden was five years Grobennar's senior, but apparently still a babe by priestly standards.

Baelor frowned. Then his mouth shifted into a sly grin. “I have a message for you to carry back to the Kleról. Tell them that while I appreciate the—”

A gravelly scream punctured the stagnant air.

*“Oh dear, she seems ever so upset. I told you we should have picked up a treat along the way. Pregnant women adore treats.”*

Grobennar had determined years ago that Jaween had a particularly annoying obsession with the human consumption of food and potions, both of which eluded his understanding. He winced as the woman continued to moan but forced himself to remain steady, outwardly unmoved by his terror. *Be strong. You've worked too hard to ruin it all with a weak stomach.*

The enormity of the woman's need redirected Baelor's attention. Taking hold of her head, he mouthed a prayer. She shouted again but this one seemed distant. Her expression softened with an exhale while her breathing remained ragged.

Baelor looked up accusingly, as if he'd just given a command and awaited its completion. "Well? You want to serve? We need fever leaves, at least four. Go, and quickly!"

Grobennar and Penden bowed then sprang into action.

*"I still think you should let me persuade him. He would become so much more enjoyable to spend time with. At least consider picking up that soup while we're out."*



## CHAPTER 6

# AYNWARD

**T**ENDRILS OF WOOD AND PIPE smoke snaked through the heavy evening air of the Flowering Bell Tavern. Only the breath of its patrons and the occasional swing of the entrance door disturbed the uncomfortably stale air.

Despite the boys' best efforts to dress down, Aynward and his three well-to-do comrades did a poor job of looking like anything but what they were. The Flowering Bell was packed with the typical crowd of local merchants, sailors, and a scattering of other less-desirable folk drawn to the fairly priced, poorly lit tavern. Common clothes just didn't look all that common without the years of wear and grime earned by those who wore them not as disguises but as a matter of course. Nevertheless the tight-knit group of friends preferred the whispers and stares of strangers to the meddling, judgmental eyes of their households, teachers, and peers. Often those looks brought with them a good welting, something none of them wished to endure if they could avoid it, especially tonight, their last evening together as youths.

A waitress tipped a pitcher of ale into the upside-down Kingdom bells sitting in front of the young men. After draining his third draft, Aynward began to relax. He was in no way happy to be leaving his home

in Salmune, so he'd vowed to at least enjoy his last night to the fullest. The King had eyed him coldly when Aynward explained his plan to board the ship tonight, but as was often the case, no words passed his father's lips to dissuade. He was the kind of man to wait until a crime was committed before passing judgment. His mother meekly followed along with whatever his father said or did.

Running his hand through his neatly cropped auburn hair, he recalled how Dagmara had done the same to him earlier that day, teasing about the sun's added touches of gold that he so abhorred. While his brothers wore their hair long, neatly brushed, and flowing with shiny highlights, he preferred his much shorter. It was easier to maintain, but, more important, it set him apart from the rest of the royals. At five foot eight he was considered of average height, with a fair amount of adolescent muscle put on through sword practice and other athletic endeavors encouraged by the allotted physical segments of his schooling. But there was nothing striking about his features. His face was well proportioned; the only notable aspect was the dimples in his cheeks, which were sharpening with maturity.

Beside the fifteen-year-old Prince of Dowe sat his long-standing friend, Fronklin. Across the stool-height table sat Stannerd and Troyston. Aynward reflected on the exaggerated enthusiasm in the greeting he had received from his friends nearly an hour earlier. He knew the others were already deep into the ale, with an exception for Stannerd who, for religious reasons, abstained entirely.

Aynward understood, sort of, but nevertheless harried his friend. "Come on, drink up, the morrow's ever coming, best enjoy today while we can." He took a swig then raised the bell again. "To the youth we'll always recall but never relive." Bells raised, they all clanged mugs and drained what remained, while Stannerd sipped his water, unperturbed.

Aynward ordered another round. He wanted to drown his discontent at being forced to leave everyone he'd ever known to go to school halfway around the world. So long as he could find his way to the departing ship before morning, he would forgo restraint tonight.

“I still can’t believe my father is sending me to school in the Isles. I could easily learn all I need to know right here in Salmune, or south in Scritler, or even Rynder. There’s no sense in it.”

“He’s afraid you’ll mess up and embarrass the crown if you stay here,” said Troyston.

“Surely he’ll do the same in the Isles!” argued Stannerd.

Troyston smiled. “Quite right, but this way fewer Kingdom royals will hear of it.” He chuckled at his own wit, while the others forced out awkward breaths in the attempt. The statement was too close to the truth. Aynward’s father had never said as much, but Aynward suspected that it might have something to do with this. And while there was merit to this sentiment considering Aynward’s youthful exploits, the lack of trust from his own father still stung.

Aynward smiled. “Might be you’re right about that, Troy. I’d best be sure and live up to his expectations. I’d hate to disappoint.” He upended his mug again, and the fermented beverage flowed down his open throat until nothing remained. Slamming down the bell, he raised a hand and yelled, “Another round over here. Another round for the King’s untrusted son and his brazen accomplices!”

The others sat there with incredulous expressions, perhaps at the reckless mention of his identity while in this part of town, or perhaps at his acceptance of Troyston’s playful quip, or perhaps both.

Stannerd leaned in and spoke softly with an intensity that indicated he was very serious. “Aynward, it is unwise to reveal yourself in such a place. There are many here who might simply see silver where others see a title. And Troyston was *clearly* joking about your father’s reason for sending you away.” He hit Troyston in the arm to force confirmation.

“Oh, yeah, right. Merely a jest. The King probably just wants you to receive the”—he searched his mind for the right way to phrase the lie—“experiential knowledge”—his lie gathered momentum—“and firsthand cultural immersion he can’t afford to risk for your older brothers who are more likely to inherit the throne, what with the added inherent dangers of vast cities of trade like Brinkwell.”

Stannerd hit Troyston even harder. "Shadowed menace, Troyston! Do you think at all before you speak? Don't listen to him, Aynward. He's a little too far in the ale to speak sense." Stannerd continued to glare at Troyston.

Aynward was not put off by the statement. "No-no-no. Troy may have had a few bells of ale, but he speaks truth. Father has all but worded such feelings. He's made no secret of the fact he's glad for my distance from the line of succession, and he wishes me away from the city. Remember last year? He banned me from leaving the palace altogether after that not-so-harmless crash at the docks when we commandeered the fishing sloop for the day."

Fronk choked on his beverage as he attempted to drink and laugh at the same time.

Troyston responded, "Yeah, we hardly saw you for nearly a full cycle of the moons."

Aynward allowed himself to laugh. "Convincing him to curtail that ban was no easy task. No, I think it true that he wants me out of sight until I can mature into something more *refined*. That's why he chose Brinkwell. He's slated me to stay with my Aunt Melanie. I met her five years ago, a spinster with nothing better to do than boss me around and keep me out of trouble. She supposedly fell in love with some low-born man unsuitable for her station and ran away to the Isles. He died a few years later, but she never returned. She's a bit of a black sheep of the family in her own right."

Troyston said, "Maybe you can use that to your advantage. Perhaps you'll have an ally instead of a second watch guard."

Aynward paused to consider. "Huh. That's not bad. You might just be right." Then he sighed heavily. "But Dolme will be more than enough bad company to make life miserable. Ugh, it's going to be absolutely dreadful." He combated the thought with a forced smile and added, "Nevertheless, I vow to come back all the worse, just for spite. Wouldn't that be some irony? Come back shoddier than I left?"

Stannerd shook his head.

"What?" asked Aynward, raising the pitch of his voice in innocence.

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking of how valuable to the crown you could be should you focus all your energy on something besides resisting the expectations set out by your father and station. I mean, Tecuix above knows you were the most gifted student at academy in spite of the fact that you gave the least effort of anyone there. You could likely maneuver yourself to run the entire kingdom someday in all but name should you put even half a mind to it.”

Troyston smiled and nodded, throwing up his bell to clink the cup of water Stannerd held. “I’ll drink to that. I can still hardly put together an intelligible sentence in Scritlandian, and you go and win the logic tournament, speaking it like you’d been born to it. Few in attendance, excepting the judges, could even understand your logic proofs, and even some of them were struggling. And all that just to piss off Counselor Marben for nearly failing you last year.”

“What was it you did to earn her ire, anyway?” asked Fronk. “I don’t remember.”

“Nothing, really. I challenged the long-held interpretation of *Gabriel and the Lance of Fire*. Wasn’t a big deal. I put forth the possibility that Gabriel didn’t actually betray his family, as is commonly taught. I merely pointed out that the Scritlandian word *devlem* can, in some cases, mean desire out of duty, instead of desire out of lust; and that there were other, perhaps better, words that could have been used to communicate the currently held interpretation. That simple shift in the interpretation of the word changes the motive for several of the other events leading up to the murder of his half brother, Lemphere. And, of course, it shifts other roles in the story a bit, turning Gabriel’s death into a tragedy, not an old children’s tale with a happy ending. I simply named him the unsung hero. Counselor Marben, however, was in no mood for academic discourse that day . . .”

Stannerd shook his head. “See what I mean? A ripping genius, though I must admit that I, too, prefer the story with its happy ending. Nevertheless here you sit, drinking your genius away. Your father must know how gifted you are. I’d wager he’s praying you’ll go there, find yourself, and come back willing to finally utilize your wits, thereby

becoming one of the most valuable men of the court instead of continuing to embarrass the court with your shenanigans.”

This struck a nerve with Aynward and he felt his face flush and his body tense with anger. The feeling vanished an instant later as he considered the source. Aynward had always appreciated Stannerd’s open honesty, and he couldn’t fault him for being who he was, even if he was a little too altruistic. *Time to cool the moment with a jest.*

“Please remind me again: why are we friends?”

Stannerd mumbled, “Because every once in a while a word of sense from me keeps you from doing something so stupid that even your father won’t be able to get you out of it.”

The young men erupted in laughter, including Stannerd, who bowed his head in mock reverence. “Service to Tecuix, and all of his people.”

Fronklin spoke once the raucous laughter died down. “Aynward, you’re forgetting the other perks of Brinkwell’s locale.”

Troyston met Fronk’s eyes and grinned. They said it together. “The ladies!”

Fronklin went on, “My family once dined with a count from one of those Isles cities. Can’t think of which one, but gods, was his daughter beautiful. Couldn’t keep myself from staring. My face was nearly bloody with all the times my mother smacked me afterward for forgetting my manners.”

“Eh, the Kingdom has plenty enough girls right here,” Aynward retorted.

Troyston dismissed Aynward’s protest with a drunken wave. “Bah, enough complaints! You want me to remember you only for your whining?”

Aynward’s eyes narrowed, then Fronk clapped Aynward on the shoulder. “Plus, I’ve heard the Isles have the most exciting cities in all Doréa, and Brinkwell is the biggest, so you won’t be able to help but have a good time.” He lifted his recently refilled bell. “To good times: both past and future.” Three of the four young men took long pulls of the brew before setting their bells down again.

Aynward felt better, though the cynic in him knew it was nothing more than the drink. He leaned back in his seat and stared at Fronk. Besides Dagmara, Fronk was his best friend and had been since childhood. Aynward studied him, as if for the first time, noticing how muscular he was compared to the other fifteen-year-olds. In the darkness of the tavern, Fronk could easily pass for a full-grown man, which would benefit him in his upcoming training with the School of War and Knighthood.

Although Fronk had the light-amber hair of central Drogen descent, like most within the Kingdom of Dowe, he did not have the typical gray eyes. Instead they were yellow like those of the far south or the grassy north, which made him unique among nobles, since most were of strictly central lineage. His mixed heritage made no difference to Aynward or most others who met him, though. Fronk's incessant smile made sure of that. It was unceasingly wide, prim, and gleaming, accentuated by a comical gap between his two front teeth. When Fronk smiled, it was difficult not to follow suit. This trait lifted spirits but also influenced far more scandalous behavior from Aynward than would have otherwise occurred over the years.

Aynward drained yet another bell after a few more minutes of small talk and friendly banter between the four. Then Stannerd suggested that they try their hands at a game of Kelkin.

Troyston looked to the others through half-open eyes. "Refresh me on the rules again?" His words came out slurred.

His friends rolled their eyes in his direction, but they knew that when Troyston was drunk, the only way to appease him was to humor him.

As the soberest of the lot, Stannerd took the lead. "Troyston, you know the rules." He balled his hand into a slightly opened fist as if holding a small ball. "You take the ball of pine, the lob, and throw it underhand from the ten-foot marker on the floor, and land it in the opening of the angled board."

Aynward butted in with an intentional cough. "I think you mistake the goal with the reality. To be clear, Troyston *tries* to throw the lob into the opening. Rarely, if ever, does it go in."

Stannerd shot Aynward an icy glare, but Aynward held his ground, raising his hands in supplication. "What? It's an important if not accurate clarification. Wouldn't want to serve up false hope."

Troyston shook his head and moaned. "Ugh, I do truly hate that game." He ran his hands through his disorderly hair. "The hole in the board is little bigger than the ball. It's near impossible to make the shots."

"And that's precisely why they cover the lob with a layer of wool, Troyston," stated Fronk, his voice filled with mischief. "To keep your rotten aim from injuring innocent bystanders."

"I hate Kelkin," Troyston repeated, slamming his bell on the table, spraying everyone with ale. He continued to grumble to himself but stood up to follow.

They began with a game on the far lane. The Flowering Bell, following the example of other local taverns and inns, set up their Kelkin in an area toward the back, away from the dining tables. Dividers were placed between baskets to keep lobes separated, which served to minimize discrepancies and, therefore, violence between adjacent players.

Aynward, who was generally a fair player, led the first game. He had a smooth stroke, letting the lob roll gently off his fingers with a nice arc as it traveled toward the hole with favorable angle for entry. Fronklin was inconsistent but had his good nights, generally those when he drank much less than he had on this evening. Stannerd and Troyston were both very competitive, but neither had much skill for a game that required a gentle touch and soft hands.

Aynward scored four of the five baskets needed to win before any of the others had scored three. However, Fronklin insisted he was just getting warmed up. To prove his point, he sank three consecutive shots for the win. "Ohhhhh, and there it is, victory to Fronklin Lungeweg, great knight of Dowe, warrior of the Kingdom, victor of the stars."

Aynward laughed. "All right, very good. I think it a string of luck, but a nice win, nonetheless."

Troyston laughed. “Yeah, lucky for sure. Jus—just had one good turn. My next drink says you don’t win again—rest of the night.”

Fronklin turned to face Troyston. “All right, how’s this? For every game I lose, I buy all you guys a drink, but for every game I win, you guys buy me two, each. What do you say to that?”

“You’ve got yourself a deal!” Troyston roared. Fronklin winked at Aynward.

“I’m in,” echoed Aynward jovially, impressed with Fronklin’s conniving.

Aynward won the next two games. The following game, however, was Fronklin’s, which meant six more bells, an ego through the roof, and a lot of noise and excitement from all.

Stannerd pointed to the tavern’s owner across the room speaking to a broad, muscular member of his staff while staring in their direction. From past experience, Aynward and the rest knew it would not be long before they were asked—or forcibly enticed—to leave. Stannerd said, “Guys, we’d best be going, we’re getting pretty loud, and the keeper just pointed us out to Alton, the strong-hand.”

Fronklin brayed between words, each syllable dragging with inebriation. “Oh, you’re just scared I’ll win another game.”

That was enough to get Aynward and Troyston back into it, howling with laughter.

“Tecuix be with us,” Stannerd whispered, pleading with the ruling god of the Chrologal faith.

Before his friends could rebuff his attempt to skip out on the remainder of the evening’s festivities, a barrel-chested man in his late forties interrupted them. “Couldn’t help but overhear you gentlemen beside us been playing for stakes.” His voice boomed over the tavern’s evening rumble. He swept an arm out to indicate three other men. “Me and my mates here were just wondering if any of you had the stones to raise those stakes a bit and play for some coin.” He inclined his head toward a dark-haired stick of a man leaning against the wall and chuckled. “Sterly here says you’re just a purebred rich lot, not worth your weight in silver without hiding behind your surnames.”

Something about the man unnerved Aynward, but he was too compromised to give his instincts much consideration. The thin man took an agile step from the wall, and in a surprisingly deep, gravelly voice, sneered to his comrade, "I'd bet forty talents to the man that the four of us wipe this lot clean. All four of us done before any one of them sinks their five." His voice gathered an edge as he continued. "But I'd bet twice that on these little boys not taking the challenge up in the first place. Even spoiled little pups like them know us sailors own the Kelkin courts. They're not fool enough to squander this week's allowance all in one evening."

Stannerd opened his mouth, likely to deflect the obvious baiting, but Aynward loved a good gamble and lunged forward, nearly striking the side of the thin man's head with his finger. "Make it fifty."

Sterly turned to face Aynward, grinning broadly. "I'll be twirled. Fearless *and* stupid. Fifty it is."

Aynward staggered a bit then steadied himself to meet Sterly's smile with a scowl. "We're gonna teach you and your rope-pulling friends exactly why our names carry with them all the gold and silver they're worth and more. And while I hate to add your hard-earned money to my already healthy coffers, I fear you'd not learn the lesson should I not."

Fronklin, who seemed to have sobered, chimed in. "I'd like to see the silver before we start. They probably don't have fifty between the four of them."

"Whatever they have on them is fine with me," Aynward replied, "so long as they leave with empty pockets—and soured egos."

Sterly spun his belt and produced a healthy-looking purse from beneath his loose-fitting shirt. He jingled the purse loudly. "Just finished a big job. Looking forward to making good on another investment."

The barrel-chested man who had initiated the conversation spoke up. "Nuff talk. Us four each scores five before any one of you has yours. Fifty talents each. Even turns. Challengers begin."

With that, he and his comrades lined up to begin their first turn. Each made their first shot. And second. And third. Aynward realized

that these men were indeed frequenters of the game and prodigious players at that. He also realized that Stannerd and Troyston were becoming dangerously frustrated with the results of this high-stakes competition. Troyston had already bloodied his knuckles on the wall, and Stannerd's volume control was long gone.

He felt a slight tingle in his chest as he reveled in the absurdity of his predicament. The tingle came not from fear, but from an exhilaration he got when up against difficult odds. He preferred the more calculated games with cards, dice, or both, where his intellect would allow him to better select bets in his favor, but this would do. He was a fair Kelkin player, and though his nerves tickled at him, he had a drunken confidence that he could beat the odds. Well, maybe not beat them, but he'd have a fair shake at victory nonetheless.

Aynward missed his first, smiled as he waited for his next, then made the following four. Stannerd had three, and the two others were still at one. Aynward's opportunity to save the evening came when one of Sterly's men missed again, still stuck at four. The young prince guessed that he would not miss again. Confirming his thoughts, the man's next shot floated into the basket to give him his five points. Aynward chided himself for missing his first—so close, but a loss. But why wasn't the man celebrating his victory?

*Idiot. Even turns,* recalled Aynward. His four opponents stood waiting for him to shoot. If he made his next shot, he and his friends would win the bet. Troyston smacked Aynward on the back for good luck, an unnecessarily heavy hand wrought by too much drink, but in his current state Aynward hardly cared.

Aynward looked away from the smug expressions of his opponents, took a deep breath, and released his grip on the lob. It sailed almost perfectly through the air toward its target, only to strike the bottom lip of the angled opening. His heart sank. Remarkably, the lob deflected up instead of down, struck the side of the hole, and bounced in for the point.

Both Fronklin and Troyston's celebratory actions ventured beyond obnoxious. They danced and hollered, and even Stannerd put forward a few modest boasts, something about the gods' favor.

Fronklin puffed up his chest and shouted a mere handsbreadth from the closest opponent's face, sloppily formed words accompanied by a spray of saliva. "Guess this means you'll be headed back to the seas a little lighter than you thought now, doesn't it? Pay up! Bahaha!" He turned and did a little jig.

Initially Aynward also shouted in excitement at his surprise victory; the thrill of tempting fate and winning warmed his whole body. But the reactions of the four challengers finally gave him pause while the rest of his friends continued their unruly taunts. The smallest of the four men smiled in a way that made Aynward's stomach turn. The triumphant sensation of the high-stakes victory seemed to race from the sky to sink deep into the bellows of the underworld.

The mangy, hollow-eyed man named Sterly pointed to Aynward's feet. "Foot fault."

His words didn't initially register with the prince, and certainly not with his friends, but Sterly said it again, with an eerie, collected calm in his voice. "Foot fault."

Aynward stared at him blankly, confused.

The man who'd initiated the challenge spoke up. "You stepped over the line, *boy*. Foot fault. That counts for a miss and loss of turn."

Sterly nodded. "You lose."

The other man held out a hand and yelled. "And now *you* pay!"

Fronklin stepped forward. "To hell with that. He made the shot!"

Sterly smiled flatly, his cavernous voice still somehow rough and smooth at the same time. "Your comrade cheated to make the shot. His foot was over the line. Nobles been cheating their way to riches for generations, but not here. No, in here we play by the people's rules. You pay up and leave or things gonna get real ugly, real fast."

Fronklin pushed the smaller man. "We're not paying a thing."

Sterly hardly moved, but his smile disappeared, replaced by a wicked snarl.

Stannerd grabbed hold of Fronklin and pulled him back while Aynward stepped forward to take his place, separating them. He may have been deep in the drink, but he was no fool; he and his friends would not win, not in here. They'd been played for dupes and there was nothing for it but to pay up and leave before things got out of hand. "My apologies. He's tipped his mug a few too many times this evening."

His mind raced. These ruffians didn't appear to be in the mood for persuasion. Aynward and his friends needed to pay quickly and be gone before they made good on their threat. Just as he reached into his purse, movement in the corner of his eye caused him to stop and hold his breath.

A lob zipped past his head and slammed into the skull of the big man. He staggered back, wobbled as if he might collapse, then shook it off, and instead lunged forward.

Aynward stood frozen in place as he watched events unravel in slow motion. The big man threw a haymaker at Troyston. Aynward tried to grab his other arm to prevent him from connecting another blow, but Serly punched Aynward in his slack stomach. Aynward doubled over in pain, before a glancing uppercut sent him upright. Serly grabbed him around the chest and pinned his arms to his side in a bear hug. Face to face, the man snickered, his liquor-laced breath assaulting Aynward's nostrils. "Oh, we're gonna get our money, good sir. You can be sure of that."

Serly's other two companions engaged Fronklin and Stannerd, who had leaped to Troyston's defense. Mustering his courage, Aynward stretched his head back and snapped it forward into his captor's face. He'd seen the move demonstrated before but had always wondered about its value. Now he knew: Serly's hold released instantly as he reached for his bleeding, broken nose. This catapulted Aynward into the action.

He landed a powerful blow to the temple of the barrel-chested man, who was still pummeling Troyston. The man stumbled then dropped limp but was replaced immediately by another. Aynward's eyes grew wide as he became conscious of his surroundings. All the Flowering Bell's patrons had snatched up the excuse for a brawl.

Aynward found that the hand-to-hand combat he'd learned on the school field held little value in the cramped tavern battleground. He couldn't identify who was on whose side as men of various shapes and sizes swung fists and slammed into one another from every direction.

He caught glimpses of his friends as they struggled to hold their ground, but he was too engaged in his own skirmishes to come to their aid. He could barely tell where the exit was or from whom he was trying to defend himself. He pulled back to punch a burly, bearded man who was running toward him, but someone caught his arm from behind so the bearded man crashed into his stomach. As he stumbled backward, gasping, whoever had grabbed his arm from behind fell on top of him. After a few shots to the face, he regained his ability to breathe. Thrusting his hips while pulling the man's elbow, he rolled on top of his attacker. Several well-placed jabs and a right elbow to the side of the head rendered the man unconscious.

Aynward remained crouched for a moment, trying to locate his friends, but he couldn't pick out anyone in the chaos. He was about to give up when he spied Fronklin being held from behind along the wall while a tall, curly-haired man used his stomach, chest, and face as a punching bag. Without thinking, Aynward took off through the maze of falling, flying men.

Slamming into the curly-haired man from the side, he took both of them to the ground. Aynward sprang to his feet and kicked him a few times before turning to free Fronklin from the stocky, toothless man who still held him.

Just as he reached the man, his vision went black, and must and mold filled his nostrils. Nimble fingers cinched a cloth bag tightly around his neck and two sets of strong arms dragged his flailing body away.

As the sounds of battle became a muddled, distant buzz, the realization that he was no longer in the Flowering Bell struck Aynward harder than any blow he'd received during the brawl.

He stopped struggling for a moment to encourage the men to loosen their grip. When they maintained their strong hold, a second realization hit him: these men knew what they were doing. Changing tactics, he

began screaming. He wasn't hopeful it would work, especially given the seedy locale, but maybe someone would intervene if they knew who he was. He bellowed about five words before a hand cupped his mouth, turning his screams to a muffled whimper.

To his surprise the hand fell away. Aynward filled his lungs with air to shout once more as the bag was lifted. Had they decided to let him go? He couldn't take the risk. As he parted his lips to yell for help, a damp rag was jammed into his mouth, stifling both his words and his hopes for rescue. Once more the cloth bag was yanked down and cinched tight around his neck. Nearly suffocating, he swallowed hard, his tongue trying to free the cloth. A bittersweet liquid trickled down his throat, making him lightheaded. His eyes closed, his body shut down, and his thoughts became tangled. No longer afraid, he let himself enter the abyss, his body floating as his thoughts descended into darkness . . .



## CHAPTER 7

# KIBURE

**S**PEARS OF LIGHT STRUCK KIBURE'S eyes. The morning sun seemed to have decided to rise more swiftly than normal. Kibure squinted as two silhouettes approached, obscured by the painful light. It was the priestess for hire, Sindri, and Musco Zagreb.

According to Sindri, Kibure had somehow used magic last night even after she enacted a castration spell that should have prevented this from being possible. What disturbed Kibure most was Sindri calling him a tazamine before leaving him alone to worry himself to sleep. He found it odd that she had sounded excited.

Kibure had no more time to collect his thoughts. As Zagreb drew close, Kibure could tell his master was feeling particularly prickly this day.

Zagreb stopped walking, still a dozen paces away. "What do you mean the spell failed?"

"I mean to say, he is immune to the spell. It is statistically rare, but it seems you were correct after all in calling the boy a tazamine."

Zagreb shifted his position so Sindri was between himself and Kibure. "Tazamine? Blast my soul! So what now? You kill him with your powers, right?"

Sindri glanced back in Kibure's direction. "Hmm—that is *an* option. A safe option to be certain. It's just—well, he could fetch ten times the price of an ordinary slave if you were to find the right buyer in the Eastern Markets of Sire Trinkanen. I've heard tales of tazamines inviting far more. The Isles, for all their profane tendencies, do have a few things in abundance—coin of course, but also an affinity for the unusual, as I'm sure you've seen in your travels to the markets."

Kibure could see Zagreb weighing his options, as if concern for his own safety waged war with his appetite for wealth. Kibure was terrified at the prospect of being sold to foreigners as some sort of amusement, especially knowing so little about this magic he was supposedly able to wield. Yet the alternative was . . . death?

He held his breath as Zagreb decided his fate.

"How would I transport him there safely? If he's still using magic, couldn't he just decide he wishes to be free and do so? I can't risk my entire cargo, let alone my life!"

Sindri replied, "A fair point. You would need someone with the skills of magic to keep his powers at bay, though he is an infant with the use of such. He is not able to call upon them on demand as of yet. But yes, you would need someone with abilities; no ordained Klerósi priest would ignore the standing order to deliver all tazamines directly to the God-king."

Zagreb glared at Kibure, then back at Sindri. He spoke through gritted teeth. "How convenient that I have someone like you in this moment of need. You will accompany me on this journey?" Kibure wasn't sure if this was a question or a statement.

Sindri looked up, surprised. "Oh. I hadn't considered that." Then she placed a finger to her chin, considering with some measure of skepticism. "I suppose I could. I certainly couldn't work for free, however. But for, say—forty percent of his sale price I *could* take a bit of time away from my business here."

"Forty percent?" huffed Zagreb. "That's criminal!"

Sindri placed hands on her hips. "I would be risking much by performing magic as we pass through the Empire's greatest cities, magic

that undermines the laws of the Kleról itself. If a seeker sensed that an unordained priestess was performing magic—” She shook her head. “Forty percent is generous.”

Zagreb turned his head and spat. “All you priestly folk are the same, ordained or not. Draining the lifeblood of the working folk. Forty percent,” he grumbled.

“Very well. I will speak with the boy for a bit, then pack my things.”

Zagreb glared at Kibure. “Yes, well, I will leave you to your business. Just make sure you leave the little monster in his cage.”

“Have no fear. He will remain where he is, unable to do you or anyone else harm.”

Zagreb nodded uncertainly then stalked away.

Sindri directed her attention toward Kibure. “So, Kibure, it seems we will be spending some time together over the course of the next few weeks.”

Kibure did not respond. He didn’t know what to say. She had, in essence, extended his life. But he had no idea to what end. Or what it would mean to be sold to a new master interested in purchasing a tazamine. The idea that this derogatory term now applied to him was still too frightening a concept to embrace. In the span of just a few days, he had become a monster of children’s tales, or at least that’s how it felt. It didn’t fit. He was no wielder. At least, he didn’t feel like he was one.

She spoke again. “Kibure, I know you don’t trust me. And I don’t blame you for that. You don’t know me, and in truth, I don’t know or trust you, either. But right now I am the closest thing you have to a friend in this world; and without my help, you will *not* survive this journey.”

Kibure glared at her, but said nothing.

“I will leave you alone for now if you like, but you’re going to have to eventually speak with me, one way or another.”

Kibure nearly opened his mouth to respond, but caught himself. He couldn’t identify just what stopped him. He simply could not muster the words. He hung his head, and Sindri sighed.

“I really don’t want to have to coerce—”

She pivoted as Zagreb returned, two slaves shadowing close behind, Yeshire and Holden. Kibure knew them, though not well. They did not typically work in the fields and they slept somewhere in the estate, away from the others. They walked over to the cage and didn't strain at all as they hoisted the steel enclosure into the air, waiting for further instruction.

"Follow me," Zagreb told them.

Zagreb led Sindri and the slaves around the equipment shed to the other side of the estate, revealing a bustling caravan of wagons. The overseer, Archben, stood shouting orders to slaves who loaded crated goods upon carts, most of it drogal fruit.

Zagreb snarled to Sindri, "We leave on the morn. I can't stomach the thought of having a tazamine within the walls of my estate any longer than necessary." Glaring at Kibure, Zagreb said, "And don't even *think* about so much as *dreaming* a dream in which you even *think* about trying something like you did before. You do and I'll go straight to the Kleról! They'll dispose of you before you even know what you planned to do."

Kibure stared back up at Zagreb, trying to make sense of the jumble, finally settling on a simpler translation: *Don't use magic.*

Without another word, Zagreb departed.

Sindri glanced over at Kibure, winked, then said in a low voice, "I haven't been to the Eastern Markets of Sire Trinkanen since just after my expulsion from the Kleról. This should be a very *interesting* journey."

Kibure did not like the way the former priestess looked at him. Not one bit.



The following morning, Kibure's cage lay squeezed between two crates upon a large wagon, rolling along a dry gravel road spanning the Angolian southwest. He peered between the bars of his cage into the distant desert horizon. Having never been beyond the walls of Zagreb's

estate, much of what he saw in the distance was completely alien. But he found its beauty remarkable.

All Kibure knew of their destination, the Eastern Markets, was that Zagreb traveled there each year with the season's surplus drogale and the occasional slave, who often did not return. The journey usually lasted several weeks, during which time his overseers took full advantage of their newfound autonomy to beat slaves to within a few strokes of death. But in spite of the woes of slavery, Kibure reflected upon the fact that he knew nothing else, and dreaded the possibility of befalling an even worse fate elsewhere.

The caravan moved south out of the village of Jarquin before turning east toward the River Lesante, named for the original prophetic. To Kibure's surprise, his sense of foreboding was balanced by his curiosity about what he might see along the way to the unknown, enigmatic Sire Trinkanen. He stared out in wonder.

Kibure's reprieve was extinguished by the sight of a crow flying high overhead. His heart fluttered at the black shape, hoping it might be Rave. It wasn't. He realized then that he had not had the opportunity to say good-bye to the little guy. Kibure had often spoken to the animal as it perched atop his shoulder while he worked. Rave had never responded of course, but Kibure had thought it nice to feel like *someone* was listening.

He now wondered at the irony of rescuing the raaven, for his means of doing so had destined him to never see the little creature again. Kibure felt ill at the thought, and wondered if Rave would miss him, too.

The day wore on and his fear of the unknown weighed upon him like the crates of drogale that strained the donkeys as they pulled the wagons down the road. Sleep did not come easy, but it did finally come.



Kibure jerked awake. The sun was just cresting the horizon as the sudden movement of his wagon roused him. He had found relative comfort by positioning himself in the corner of the cage with his head supported

by three bars instead of two. He had banged his head on the bars to either side a few times as he drifted off before mastering the technique.

He closed his eyes again but a cough nearby caused them to snap back open. Then he saw her. Sindri. The sorceress was perched upon a crate looking down on him in his cage. “Ah, you’re awake.” She wore a pensive expression though there was a sparkle in her eyes. “I’ve been watching you sleep for quite some time.”

The thought made Kibure’s skin crawl, but he decided it best to keep that opinion to himself.

“You’re a remarkable specimen.” She brought a hand to her chin in thought. “While awake, you put out no magical aura whatsoever, at least so far as I can detect.” She shook her head. “When you sleep, though, there is an occasional trace of *something*. It’s much different than the, for lack of a better word, scent, of a Klerósi priest at work, or even of the rare tazamines we keep alive for the training of seekers within the Kleról before turning them over to the God-king. But even Klerósi priests put out no aura unless actually drawing or wielding the power of Klerós. You, on the other hand, you actually release small puffs every so often, thin wisps small enough that only a seeker in extremely close proximity would likely ever notice.”

When Kibure did not respond, she continued, “I have done considerable research on the subject in recent years; however, foreign literature is difficult to come by, especially translated. From what I’ve gathered, few races have large numbers of innate magic wielders, what we would classify as tazamines, while nearly all people have the capacity to learn to one degree or another. You, however, seem a different stock altogether.”

Kibure recalled several years earlier when Klerósi priests visited the farm to do testing on all of the slaves, though the purpose was not revealed until afterward. But they had left. He had passed scrutiny. They had found no tazamines. The encounter had simply ended, followed by a short sermon reminding the slaves that if they remained loyal to their masters and to Klerós, they would be allowed to enter the lower levels of eternal paradise as free men, forgiven for the sins of their ancestors.

Sindri brought Kibure back to the present. “While you were sleeping, I asked your musco a few things about your past. I will ask you the same questions in an effort to establish a baseline of trust between us.”

Kibure didn’t look up.

Undiscouraged, Sindri continued, “So, your name is Kibure. Is this your birth name?”

Kibure remained silent. If she knew all the answers, why bother asking? He had no idea what she meant by *baseline of trust*.

She sighed. “You’re not much for talking, are you? I normally prefer folks like that, but in this case, it will go much better for you if you simply answer my questions.”

He stared at her blankly.

She sighed heavily, then extended a hand in his direction. A tingling sensation ran up Kibure’s body and he grew warm. The woman’s eyes became vast cauldrons, boiling at their center. The heat increased and sweat beaded on Kibure’s forehead far too quickly to be natural.

He panicked. “I’ll talk! I’ll talk! Please—please make it stop!”

The heat vanished in an instant.

“Excellent!”

Sindri folded her hands in her lap. “Kibure, I want us to be comfortable with each other, to be able to trust one other. I don’t want to have to do things like that to you. But you must understand that this is my life’s work and I *will* do as I must.”

His reluctance was outweighed by his fear. He finally mumbled, “Yes, my birth name is Kibure.”

He was certain that he should *not* trust her.

The woman stared at him through placid eyes. “So, you were not born to the Lugiense slave or free race. Have you any knowledge of your birth mother?”

“No.”

His true lineage was indeed unknown. His skin tone was not like that of anyone he had ever seen. His extended days in the sun had done nothing to darken his skin, which remained sickly pale. He lacked the blond hair of most Lugiense slaves, or the translucent locks of

Lugienese free-folk. His hair was, instead, inky black, darker than the longest Angolian night. But, according to others, his most distinct features were his eyes. His irises were said to be white like clouds, the only pigment being a bluish outer ring. Even fellow slaves rarely maintained eye contact and most avoided him altogether.

Kibure had asked about his mother several times but had been told little more than that she had shown up at the estate gates one morning, alone, speaking an unknown language, near to giving birth. Zagreb had eagerly taken her and her child as slaves. According to the woman who had served as his wet nurse, his mother had perished shortly after giving birth.

Sindri said, “Well, I can’t say I’ve ever seen anyone of your complexion before, but let’s move on to the reason I was called in from the town to visit. I would like for you to tell me about the magical attack on your master, Zagreb. I would like to hear *your* side of what transpired.”

“I—I don’t want to talk about *that*.”

The woman leaned in closer, touching the bars of the cage. “Listen, I may be able to help you understand what you did, what you *can* do. But I have to be able to make sense of it myself.”

*What I can do? What does that even mean?* Hadn’t she said she could keep him from wielding his powers? Either way, he did not want to discuss this foul thing, this magic. He remained silent.

“Kibure. I mean you no harm, *but* I have been searching for someone like you for years. I intend on capitalizing on this opportunity.” Her expression darkened and she gripped the bars to his cage so hard the olive skin of her knuckles turned white. “Do not mistake my kindness for weakness. I intend on discovering what I must from you, one way or another.”

The tingling sensation returned and so did Kibure’s shaky voice. “Where should I begin?”

Sindri became just as relaxed as she had been the moment she arrived, her intensity vanishing as quickly as the heat she’d fused into Kibure moments earlier. “Tell me of this little friend of yours. When did he first start visiting?”

Kibure froze. How could he explain Rave? He understood the raaven about as well as he understood the power he had used the other day. What could he say? What *should* he say? Would she try to capture and hurt Rave?

“I—don’t know anything about—”

Another wave of heat enveloped him, this time stronger. It hurt.

“Okay!” Words flowed from him then, and he hated himself for it. He recounted the events of his magical *episode*, as he now considered it, as well as his limited interactions with Rave. He regained enough of his composure toward the end to leave out his dreams. Something about her was just plain *wrong*. And yet here he was, telling her everything she wished to know.

“That’s all I know, honestly.”

Sindri nodded, apparently satisfied, but made no move to leave. “When you attacked that man with magic, did you call upon a god, Klerós or other?”

Kibure stared up silently once again, defiance returning in full. Sindri repeated the question. This time her tone indicated that there would be a consequence should he ignore her.

Kibure hesitated. The incident had been the catalyst for his new uncertain fate. Observing the intensity of her stare finally convinced him to say, “No.”

Sindri stared in anticipation of an explanation that did not come. Her eyes narrowed. “Well, what happened then?” Her scowl sharpened when his response was not forthcoming. Then he felt the heat of her magic.

“I—I already explained this! I don’t know how it happened! I was just angry that he killed Rave, and that’s all I was thinking; poor innocent, Rave. It all just happened too quickly.” *And slowly*, thought Kibure as he recalled the warped sense of time and the out-of-body-experience of the event.

Sindri smiled and nodded, her eyebrow arching upward. “It is as I suspected, then.” She waited for Kibure to inquire about this, but when he didn’t, she went on as if he had.

“The Kleról holds to the belief that all users of magic outside of the Kleról channel power granted by the Dark Lord of the underworld, just as we pray to Klerós to help us channel *his* power. And while this may be true in some cases, I believe there to be a more innocent culprit, at least in exceptional cases like yours.”

Her expression grew distant, and dark. “I was forced from the Kleról over this very disagreement and have been searching for a tazamine like yourself ever since.”

Kibure knew near to nothing about the Kleról, but had assumed she had simply been rejected for not being powerful enough or something. Even still, her explanation seemed lacking.

He said, “You left the Kleról over a disagreement about tazamines? Seems like—” He stopped himself short of insulting her. That would be very unwise.

She narrowed her eyes and said, “Seems like—a stupid reason to give up a lofty position within the most powerful organization within the Lugiense Empire?”

Kibure did not dare agree. He opened his mouth, then closed it. Silence was the safest answer. He had said too much already.

She nodded. “The truth is much more complicated than this, but *that* is a story for another time.”

Kibure was just glad to have escaped his own stupidity. He finally replied, “So—you’re going to—what—study me throughout the journey to the markets?”

Sindri sighed. “Well, sort of. Zagreb would surely turn us both over to the Kleról should I succeed in coaxing you to use your magic again. He does not understand it, and therefore, like most, is frightened by it. When I was in Sire Trinkanen, I heard tales of powerful wizards from the lands to the east. They can’t all be followers of the darkness, can they?”

When Kibure did not answer immediately, Sindri answered herself. “No, I think not. So I will be observing you along the way. For now you can rest assured that you are safe, so long as you are truthful with me,

and don't draw the attention of the Kleról by using your magic as we pass through cities with seekers along the way."

Sindri waited again for his response but he gave none. "I almost traveled east of the Empire to the Isles in search of answers," she said, "just after fleeing the Kleról. But I couldn't summon the courage at the time. What would I do for a living? It's bad enough having to work in the shadows to avoid the Kleról here. But would Klerós's magic be so strong beyond our borders? I just don't know. I should like to think it is so. He's Lord of the world, or will be someday, so it shouldn't matter where I am." Her expression hardened, as did her next words. "I intend to go this time." Again, more speaking to herself than Kibure, she said, "Of course, I still have to work out how I'm going to procure you once in the markets. Zagreb's going to want the coin I promised from your sale."

She slid over to the edge of the crate she sat upon, feet dangling over the slowly moving ground below. "Well, I've plenty of time to reason out a plan now, don't I?" She nodded her head as if convinced, then hopped off the wagon, landing gracefully with a smooth, reptilian gait that went so well with her sardonic smile.

Kibure sat in his cage, mouth agape. The thought of becoming the property of this woman terrified him perhaps more than being sold to a stranger. Yet what choice did he have? What would happen if he told Zagreb? Zagreb would surely call *real* Klerósi priests. They would *both* be killed.

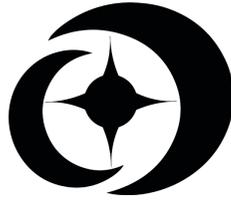
Kibure needed to focus his attention elsewhere before he lost his mind. He peered out of his cage at the waking desert landscape, determined to cherish the small gift, ignoring the circumstances in which he experienced it. He doubted he would ever see such wondrous sights again.

The landscape slowly shifted from desolate Angolian desert to grassland. Zagreb had always decorated his vast living quarters with a variety of plant life in order to distinguish it from the others within the estate, but Kibure had never seen such a tableau of beauty as this. Diverse shades of green grass converged with the orange soil at the boundaries

of the two landscapes in a display that made Kibure shudder with frustration that he had been deprived of such splendor. While the grass and other shrubs within the estate walls were well tended, these grasses were completely free of man's touch; he envied them.

Kibure heard Zagreb's voice up ahead. "There it is. The River Lesante! Keep to the banks and head north." Then he saw the massive, dark, slithering object. Rivers were made of water, so he had heard, but the thought had been difficult to comprehend. It rained only a few times per year and only ever for a few hours. Slaves hardly saw more than a small skin of water at any given time. The river snaked along the flat landscape in long, gently curving arcs as far as his eyes could see. The sight of that much water took Kibure's breath away.

As they reached the shore, Kibure was finally able to appreciate the sheer volume of water. The river was vast beyond his wildest dreams. He wondered how there could be so much water in one place with so little elsewhere. Why would Klerós bless one place with such abundance while cursing the rest? It was as fickle as the blessings and curses of the races.



## CHAPTER 8

# GROBENNAR

[Twenty-Five Years Earlier]

**G**ROBENNAR RETURNED WITH THE REQUESTED fever leaves within the hour. He now stood by, his face placid as the woman's eyes rolled back into her head. The child's father watched helplessly as Grobennar and the others labored to keep the woman nourished. The pain appeared to cut right through the numbing effects of the Lion's Blood.

Grobennar observed the father who wore no bracelet of marriage, along with the woman's lack of facial jewelry, which spoke of poverty, and yet they were both clearly of unbroken Lugiense ancestry. No true-blooded Lugiense would be denied birthing assistance by the Kleról. The woman's characteristic light-brown skin glistened, while her yellow, rounded eyes seemed to glow as beams of light sneaked in through a small window in the wall. She cried out once more, her voice growing hoarse.

"Should we call for a tazabi?" Grobennar asked, referring to the priests who specialized solely in the healing arts. Penden shot Grobennar a frightened glance at the suggestion.

Fatu Kazi Baelor looked up and scowled. “Listen here, boy, I’ve been delivering babes since before your own godforsaken parents suckled at—”

Baelor’s face blanched as he glanced back to the woman. “The Child is crowning!” He laid hands upon her, lending strength from the Creator. The woman flexed her abdomen once more, using every part of her essence for another desperate push.

“It’s here!” the young Penden shouted.

“What the—”

The woman’s lover shrank back in horror at the abomination that emerged from her womb. “Klerós! How cursed am I! What dark sin escapes my recall that I might be punished so?”

Eyes glistening with tears, the father turned his head to retch.

Penden looked to Grobennar with a troubled expression.

The woman stretched a hand toward the father. “I’m sorry. So sorry . . .” The whisper stole her final breath, but the man was too caught up in despair to acknowledge her words.

Fatu Kazi Baelor stepped back, swirling his fingers up, a plea for protection against the frightful scene before him.

*“Ooooh what a treat! I can feel Klerós’s touch on this child. How marvelous!”*

Grobennar’s revulsion was replaced with awe as he recalled every word of the prophecy foretelling such an unusual birth. It was his unequaled knack for scholarship, after all, that had earned him entry into the Kleról. The priests couldn’t deny a young boy’s gifts after listening to him recite the seven major scrolls of Klerós from memory, a feat unmatched by even the most devout of working priests.

Grobennar’s heart raced as he realized he was witnessing an event of unthinkable grand proportions.

Baelor was the first to move, lifting the red, egg-shaped object the size of a newborn baby. It sparkled in the light. He set the precious object down beside the corpse of the woman and opened his robes. Grobennar assumed he would pull out a small blanket. Instead the Fatu Kazi drew a dagger.

Fatu Kazi Baelor muttered, "Darkness descends, the Dark One approaches. Darkness descends, the Dark One approaches." Grobennar looked on in horror as the man raised the weapon with both hands, his crazed eyes narrowed with determination.

*"Perhaps you should let me speak with him now. He seems like he may need a bit of persu—"*

"Please do!" Grobennar ripped off his pendant and hurled it at Baelor. Jaween's ordinarily jovial tone became a gleeful hiss as he attacked the man's mind. The pendant struck Baelor in the chest, then clinked to the ground. That was more than close enough.

Baelor's eyes went wide, darting around the room in search of the source of the voice that assailed his mind. *"Release the blade. Your hand is too weak. Indeed, your fingers are already slipping. Give in to the weakness. Release the blade . . ."*

Grobennar could see Baelor's closed fingers trembling around the raised knife, his will struggling against the persuasive powers of the spirit, Jaween.

Baelor's expression hardened.

*"Oh. Oh! Impressive! His will is so strong! This will be more fun than I have had in ages!"*

Without time to consider the consequences, Grobennar's hand slid to the belt beneath his robes, unsheathing his own dagger.

Baelor let out a bestial scream, then raised the knife as high as it would reach. *Klerós forgive me.* Grobennar drew back and threw just as Baelor's weapon raced to split the red chrysalis.

The High Priest's knife glanced harmlessly off the hardening object, the strength of his blow weakened by the shock of Grobennar's well-aimed dagger, which slammed deep into his chest. The Fatu Kazi braced himself against the edge of the table, his face a mix of pain and confusion as he stared into the eyes of his executioner. Grobennar recovered from his own shock, then strode toward the man.

*"Ohhhh, nice shot, Grobes! Though I wish you had given me more time. I nearly had him."*

"What have you done?" shouted a lesser tadi priest in the room named Taldic.

Grobennar's eyes didn't leave the chrysalis. "Rescued the Savior of our people."

By the time Grobennar reached the table, Baelor's protests came out as mere gurgles, followed by rivulets of blood, which flowed from his gaping mouth. Grobennar thought he made out the word, "heretic." *No*, he decided, "hero."

Ignoring the dying man's pleading hands as they grasped at his robe, Grobennar yanked his dagger free, then shoved the soon-to-be corpse to the floor, where it collapsed like a hunk of meat for sale at the market.

Taldic sprinted for the exit.

*"Such a shame. I think you frightened that one. Should I convince him to stay? He really should stay to help."*

"No," muttered Grobennar. "Let him go."

Jori and Penden remained, staring on in disbelief. Meanwhile, the would-be father had shrunk down, shaking in the corner of the room.

Grobennar retrieved the pendant containing Jaween, then scooped up his prize. Within minutes of exposure to air, the outer tissues had hardened into a smooth, rounded shell. And as he suspected, its temperature was dropping rapidly. Wrapping the chrysalis in the folds of his robes, he raced out of the room. "Jori! Make sure the father comes with us. He must come!"

Upon his arrival at the nearby Klerósi temple, Grobennar handed the precious object to Penden. "Place this against your skin and keep it warm! Prophecy unfolds."

Penden's expression was one of confoundment, but he did as commanded. That would have to be enough.

Grobennar ran inside and headed toward the great furnace, which was generally reserved for ritual sacrifice. Three Klerósi priests lounged about, lazily seated, unmoving.

Grobennar shouted at them, "Light the fire!"

They didn't. The men looked more annoyed than anything. Grobennar recited the well-known lines of prophecy:

*The shell of Klerós's faith shall wrap the Savior in red.  
The Child of Hope will emerge,  
and with him the life of our Deliverer.*

They looked at him like he had just told them how many moons were in the sky. One of the priests, a slender man, replied, "Every man in the Empire knows the lines, what of it?" Arching an eyebrow and smiling, he asked, "Has another woman died delivering a child?" His voice was so condescending that Grobennar wondered how it even reached his ears from such a height.

The priest stood and took several steps toward Grobennar, then stopped and brought a cupped hand to his mouth as if to whisper. "A secret for you, since you appear to be new to your robes. Over one hundred true-bloods die giving birth to sons every year in this city alone. The hour is late and I don't feel much like burning a child's wrist this evening. Bring him in tomorrow and I'll have the holy flame burning bright to test the skin of your little *savior*." The intractable priest turned his back and started for his seat beside the others.

"*Shall we?*" came the voice in Grobennar's head.

Desperation flooded him. The ritual *must* be completed, and he couldn't do it alone. He let out a deep breath. *I'm going to hang for this.* "Try to be subtle," he whispered to Jaween.

"*Of course! Subtlety is one of my best assets!*"

Grobennar rolled his eyes. He was close enough to the other priest that he didn't need to remove the pendant.

"*Servant of Klerós.*" The man stiffened. "*The Savior has been born. Do as the young priest asks or burn in the eternal flames of damnation.*"

"So much for being subtle," mumbled Grobennar.

The priest looked around in confusion, then turned to regard Grobennar and frowned as Jaween continued his tirade.

"*To ignore this holy task is to bring about great suffering. Turn away from this sin and do as the priest asks.*" Taking a step closer the man growled, "So you learned the spell for mind speech and think we're all just going to follow your orders? I said, come back tomorrow!"

Grobennar felt the man gathering Klerós's power. Grobennar was a mere novice in the art of battle magic; he would be no match for a well-trained priest, even with the extra summoning power of Jaween.

"*Time for plan B,*" said Jaween to Grobennar's mind.

"And just what is that?"

"*Kill him, of course.*"

The man suddenly braced himself as if someone had just handed him a very heavy object. He covered his ears with both hands and let out a shout of pain.

Grobennar understood. He now had a very narrow window of opportunity within which to act. Jaween would be screaming at a painfully high frequency inside the priest's mind, temporarily immobilizing him. The others in the room rose to their feet, believing Grobennar responsible for the attack.

"*Time to kill.*"

Drawing his dagger once more, Grobennar took a quick step and lunged forward, but instead of driving his blade into the man's exposed abdomen, he sidestepped and slid behind.

"Plan C," he said to Jaween.

He drew a gash across the man's back, just deep enough to wound, then kicked the stunned priest behind the knee. The man buckled. Grobennar was no blade master, but all priests trained in the martial arts and this man was also contending with Jaween's mental assault. Before the priest could recover and defend, Grobennar had the steel pressed against his neck, feigning an eagerness to deliver the killing blow.

"Move and I slit your throat," he said in an even voice he didn't inwardly feel.

Then, looking at the other stunned priests, he spoke louder, more firmly. "I *will* kill him unless you do *exactly* as I command."

They didn't move, unsure whether or not he was sincere in his boast. They had all filled themselves with Klerós's power, he could feel each of them now, ready to strike. He drew a thin line of blood and the trembling priest whimpered.

"I've killed once tonight to see this prophecy fulfilled. I will *not* hesitate to do so again."



## CHAPTER 9

# AYNWARD

**A**YNWARD'S VISION BEGAN TO CLEAR, then faded again as dizziness overtook him. He thought this had occurred several times before but couldn't be certain as he descended back into the void.

He opened his eyes later and, for the first time in what felt like days, he was able to keep them open. Before he could concern himself too much with his environment, he realized something far more distressing: he could hardly move his neck—or the rest of body, for that matter. He was on his back and wrapped so tightly he could barely breathe. He strained and struggled as claustrophobia set in. After a few moments, the initial shock of his confinement wore off, and he was able to calm himself enough to focus on his surroundings.

He had to strain his eyes to make out anything in the gloom. More challenging than the darkness was the dim crease of light that seeped beneath what must have been a door. It swayed and danced before his eyes. Slowly it dawned on him that it was not just the light swaying but his body, as well. Though he lay perfectly still, he felt as if he was slowly spinning.

A few minutes later, he thought he heard footsteps by the door, but this was also an untrustworthy perception. The sounds reverberated

within his mind, yet he was certain that only the first sounds were truly real, unaffected by whatever had given him over to these hallucinations.

Even so, he was able to discern at least the basic dimensions of the room, about three paces long and similarly wide. The walls, ceiling, and floor were made of wood. Thanks be to Tecuix. Despite the strange sensory deceptions—by-products, he assumed, of whatever chemical his kidnappers had used to subdue him—his mind had been left unmolested.

As he scanned the cell, he spotted a strange arrangement of ropes stretching across the room. He wondered at their purpose, but he was more curious about why he was there in the first place. Memories of the previous evening flooded his mind. Then again, he couldn't truly be certain how much time had passed. Perhaps he had been unconscious for longer than a day.

Fear snapped at him as he remembered the fight and the sudden end to his consciousness as he was seized and drugged. He feared the worst for his friends, who could easily be dead now if things had continued to escalate after he was taken. Foreboding gripped him. Even if the least of his fears had come to fruition and his friends had escaped unharmed, there was always the possibility of getting dragged into Salmune's crooked courtrooms on bogus charges, although the judges often gave nobles an easier time of it.

Aynward's thoughts were interrupted intermittently by what he assumed were footsteps passing by the cell door again. He also heard faint voices. He couldn't make out what was being said, the sounds twisting into deep, hollow echoes.

He called out, thinking perhaps that the others had been taken captive, too. He shouted at the top of his lungs, calling out to Fronklin, Stannerd, and Troyston, or anyone else within earshot. No one answered, and the sound of his own voice was so loud and warped to his ears that he could hardly endure it.



Time dragged on for what may have been days. His frustration continued a cycle of climactic unbearability followed by sorrow as he tried to understand why he was being confined within this strange place. The effects of whatever was plaguing his senses wore off slowly then relapsed after his first meal, which was some sort of smooth, barely edible porridge, followed by a dark beverage, both of which were poured down his throat. The person who brought him this meal remained concealed beneath a dark hood and a scarf that covered all but the eyes.

Within a few minutes of ingesting the food, he experienced sensory-altering distortions. He wished his thoughts were also affected, because perhaps a bent mind would better cope with what he endured. Instead of a vague rotational sensation, Aynward felt as if a hole had just appeared in the floor and he was sinking through. He closed his eyes, but that merely compounded the sensation of accelerating motion and he was compelled to open them again.

There was just enough light to alter the shapes before his eyes, making the falling and spinning all the more vivid. It was accompanied by loud warbled noises that seemed to never end. Time was impossible to measure. Eventually the stimulation became too much for his mind to process, and he fell back into a comparably lucid sleep. His dreams were not much better than his waking visions, but at least they were set within the reality of what life should look, feel, and sound like.

When Aynward woke again, the effects were dulled enough for him to tolerate. He attempted to refuse the food and drink. Going hungry was preferable to what the drug would inevitably induce. But his captor was prepared to do battle. Aynward's nose was plugged, causing him to eventually open his mouth to breathe, and there was a metal tool awaiting him. The tool forced his mouth open. In the end, his resistance earned him cut lips and a bit of the drugged food smeared in his eye when he shook his head. Then the hell began all over again.

As time passed, he began to cherish those few hours within which he was not bombarded with the exaggerated, sometimes completely

unreal sensations that gripped so much of his mind it had to shut itself down. During this time of seemingly gentle weightlessness his thoughts were able to stabilize and return to that which he knew.

His thoughts ventured home to his family, namely his sister Dagmara, who, to his dismay, had warned him of going out. Warned him that his rowdy behavior would eventually catch up to him. Aynward was the youngest of six children, and his parents were always busy with public affairs and court business. His next-closest brother in age had left the courts four years prior for a school in Scritler, where he would train and likely become Dowe's next general, despite there having not been a noteworthy uprising or military campaign in eighty years. Aynward missed his sister dearly now, and his heart ached at the continual reminder that his friends might no longer be alive . . .



After an undeterminable period, Aynward awoke to a sensation he thought he might never feel again: normality. At least his sight had steadied, and sounds didn't shift with echoes in his mind. There was still a motion about his body, but it felt more natural, almost real. He wondered how long it would take before his captors realized they had forgotten to drug him. The moment the thought crossed his mind, the door opened, and light shot in—real light that didn't bend or pulsate.

As Aynward's eyes adjusted to the brightness, he saw what he assumed was the same person who had been feeding him throughout his captivity. He was dressed in colors that were dark but not quite black. He was also tall with broad shoulders and an air detectable by the slight arch of the back that forced the chest forward. There was something almost familiar about his posture and size, but nothing Aynward could piece together in the few seconds he had before the person knelt before him, his face still hooded and wrapped, the shadows concealing his eyes.

As always, the person did not speak, but this time he set a canteen and a bowl on the floor a few paces away from Aynward. In it was something different from the porridge they had served him thus far.

Aynward's initial excitement disappeared as he considered the notion that different didn't necessitate better.

The man rolled Aynward's cocooned body over, forcing his face against the floor, and then pulled him to his feet by grabbing the wraps between his shoulder blades. A wave of nausea swam through Aynward's body then retreated a few seconds later. The man held him upright with one arm as he pulled out a knife from his dark tunic.

When Aynward saw the knife, he flinched and struggled, nearly falling to the floor. His captor gave him a swift elbow to the chest with his knife arm while struggling to hold him up with the other. Once Aynward was stable again, the man cut the cloth that had bound him like an ancient Scritlandian mummy of the stories. This allowed Aynward to separate his feet and stand on his own, though his legs were much weaker than he expected.

Once Aynward could stand, the man unwrapped the rest of the cloth that restrained his torso. Another individual—dressed in the same fashion, his face concealed—entered. However, this person was much smaller and far less intimidating. In his hands were a mop and bucket.

Aynward stood completely naked but for the rope that restrained his wrists. Neither of his captors spoke a word as they forced him to lie down on his stomach and spread his legs. A heavy boot kept him in place as a sudden rush of steaming water flowed over his backside, stinging his skin. This was followed by the mop. After a minute of scrubbing and a rinse with the now tepid water, the first man hoisted Aynward to his feet while the other used the mop to soak up the remaining moisture from the floor.

Throughout this process, no one spoke. Aynward had given up trying to speak to his captors after the first few times they had fed him. His protests had been met with silence. Yet perhaps this time would be different. His question came in a weak voice, since he hadn't spoken at all for a few days. His throat felt dry, the sound coarse. "Why are you doing this? Why am I here?"

No answer.

“Why have I been locked up here? What crime have I committed to deserve this?”

Neither of his captors responded. Aynward tried again, his voice halfway between a shout and a crackled whimper, this time directing his question at the larger one, whose covered face was at last turned toward him.

“What have I done to deserve this? Why have I been locked up in this hell? And what of my friends? Please tell me, do they at least live?” When no answer came, he took another step forward and shouted. “Answer me! Why don’t you answer me?”

The ominous person drew a sword from beneath his robe and held it at Aynward’s throat. It remained pointed at Aynward’s neck while his other hand shot up in front of Aynward’s face, his index finger moving back and forth, indicating that Aynward discontinue his approach.

Aynward was desperate to know what was going on, but he knew enough to stand down. He calmed his breathing, stepped back toward the wall, and crouched, his hands still behind his back, his jaw resting on his knees.

As the two turned to leave, the larger man stopped in the doorway and turned back. Aynward looked up. For the first time, he got a good look at the man’s eyes, illuminated by the outside light. They were piercing and powerful, but there was also something familiar about them. The look lasted but a second, and then the man and his companion were gone again. However, they left behind the empty water bucket, along with the food bowl and the canteen, and Aynward was no longer confined to complete stillness.

It didn’t take him long to figure out how to get his hands out from behind him in order to eat and drink what they had left for him. He simply lay down on his back, brought his legs up to his chest, and wiggled his wrists up in front. He felt far more comfortable and comparably free as he gulped down the chunky slop that, he noted later to himself, tasted like a harvest feast compared to the mind-altering porridge they had force-fed him until now.

The room was almost completely dark again, but once his eyes adjusted, he was able to locate the canteen. As he drank the first few sips, he felt every drop coat his mouth, travel down his throat, and into his empty stomach. His innards had never felt so dry or empty as to delight in something so trivial as a few drops of water. He scarfed down the remainder of the canteen and the bowl, but it felt as if his body consumed the food and water instantly, like desert sands sucking up what moisture they could before the sun summoned the rest back into the sky. It was not enough. However, in a few hours he felt relatively restored, although his muscles were stiff and atrophied from disuse.



## CHAPTER 10

# KIBURE

**K**IBURE'S HEAD BANGED AGAINST THE cage as a pair of strong deckhands hoisted it into the air. Zagreb directed the two slaves toward a vast floating structure. They maneuvered tirelessly around a bustle of activity to keep up with Musco Zagreb as he debated where to stow his human cargo amid the chaos. The immensity of goods stacked upon the flat deck astonished Kibure as he considered the fact it was all floating atop an unknowable volume of water.

"That'll do fine right there." Zagreb pointed to a place alongside several crates filled with harvested drogol from the estate.

"Anything else, musco?" asked the shorter of the two true-blood workers.

"Yes, my personal belongings are to be stowed in the second room, starboard side." Zagreb tossed the young man a coin. "Be careful with it."

The deckhand smiled wide at the payment. "Of course."

The taller of the two workers looked at Zagreb expectantly. The tightfisted musco didn't flinch. "Well? Stop standing there and get back to work!"

The smile faded from the deckhand who realized the single coin was to be split between them. They disappeared around a tall pile of crates, both shaking their heads in frustration.

With the two workers no longer obstructing his view of the river, Kibure finally had a chance to survey what little he could see of it. The sun was not yet visible, but the eastern sky stirred with a hazy orange glow. He could see little else through the thick, frothy fog. This white mist hovered over the river, illuminated by the last of the night's moons. Arms of glowing moisture seemed to reach out to the world beyond the water like hungry hands in search of food, only to be absorbed by the thirsty reeds lining the shore.

Kibure had never seen fog like this. A plume of white mist swirled toward him, a hand reaching out to steal away with his soul. Kibure cowered in his cage, covering his face in futile defense against the unknown entity. He had heard tales of unbound ancestral spirits angrily awaiting passage into the afterlife. Had the river become a conduit for their vengeance against the world of the living? Kibure shook helplessly as the cold essence washed over him. He breathed a sigh of relief minutes later when nothing happened; the trembling in his hands remained long after.

More than an hour later, the activity onboard the barge had slowed only slightly. Zagreb reappeared from behind a stack of cargo alongside Sindri and a man dressed in a bright-colored jacket and trousers. Around them, men continued to work busily to secure the cargo with ropes.

Zagreb was saying, "Excellent news, Captain. We'll be off before the sun breaks the fog."

"Indeed," replied the captain, who smiled and nodded toward Kibure. "I must tell you, Musco Zagreb. I don't see many slaves chained *and* caged, especially not ones so"—he frowned—"sickly in appearance. He's not diseased, is he?" The captain's eyes narrowed. "Or is he one of those—tazamines?" Taking a step back, he growled, "I won't abide that onboard my ship. No sir. I won't test Klerós's patience upon the seas."

Zagreb forced an awkward chuckle. “No, no. Of course not. I just—well—you can’t be too careful these days. He might not look like much, but he’s quite the escapist and a runner. Too much work trying to chase him around is all.”

A cluster of newcomers approached, stopping a few paces away. To Kibure’s astonishment, three of them were tied together, more slaves. They were led by the taller of the two deckhands from earlier, who found a nearby post. “Here?”

A portly man squeezed between the slaves and the balcony to get a better look. He pointed to a tall post a few paces from Kibure’s cage, one of the few remaining spaces available. “Right there will do nicely.”

Zagreb greeted the newcomer while the slaves were being secured. “Ah, Bragden, it’s been too long, brother.” The two embraced in a firm hug and slapped each other’s backs hard before separating. The similarity between them was striking; they could have been twins.

Stepping back, Zagreb said, “I was beginning to worry that you’d hold up our departure. Captain Tigie here says we’re almost ready to lift anchor.”

“Bah, you always were the early riser. Should have gone into town last evening. You’d understand my reason for keeping in bed a bit longer. *She* had a good-lookin’ friend, *if you catch my meaning*.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “A man forgets the lively nature of these river towns after too long away. The women here are unrivaled!”

Zagreb shook his head. “I see you’re still keeping to your marriage vows.” Zagreb’s retort appeared lost on his brother.

Noticing Kibure, Bragden remarked, “Whoa! I like the cage! This little mongrel must be quite the handful. Wish I’d thought to bring something like that. I’d sleep easier knowing mine were so secure!” Turning to Captain Tigie he continued, “You got any more cages?”

Captain Tigie seemed to awaken from a standing slumber at the mention of his name. “I—uh—no.” Shaking his head, he mumbled, “You muscos are a paranoid lot. Perhaps I *should* invest in a few cages, could charge for rent.” He excused himself by saying, “Best see to a few

things before setting off, lest I make a liar of myself.” He exchanged a quick handshake with the muscos before escaping from sight.

Zagreb nervously whispered to Sindri, who had been examining one of the nearby crates. “The boy *is* fully secured, right?”

Sindri smiled and answered loud enough for all to hear, “He is; though, if you’re still frightened, I’d suggest maintaining a healthy distance. He’s liable to”—she paused, then suddenly brought her hands up—“rattle the bars!”

Zagreb jumped.

Sindri grinned. “I’ve seen him do it. It’s *terrifying*.” She winked and let out a slight chuckle.

Zagreb glared at her. He opened his mouth, but Bragden interrupted their exchange.

“Here, here.” Bragden’s eyes swept appreciatively over Sindri. “Now I see why you remained with the cargo last evening.” Licking his lips, he continued, “How much would it cost for an evening with *her*?”

Kibure cringed in revulsion. He had witnessed this sort of sexual bravado imposed on female slaves.

Sindri radiated menace. Zagreb put up a hand to silence his brother. “As aggravating as the lady Sindri’s tongue may be, I would suggest restraint while in her presence. She is, after all, my hired *priestess*.”

Bragden narrowed his eyes. “Priestess? She doesn’t wear the red silks. What is she, a slag?”

Zagreb winced, eyeing Sindri for signs of reprisal at the use of the slanderous word, true as it might be.

Sindri surprised them with a broad smile, but Kibure noticed her hands slowly forming fists. “Why yes—Bragden, is it? I am indeed that which many call a slag. Not to worry, I am not ashamed. Having already forsaken the Kleról, I’m free to forgo restraint, especially with regards to those who offer offense. These last few years have been . . .”

The hair on Kibure’s neck rose. *She’s using magic!*

“. . . quite liberating.”

The man squeaked and took a step back. “Wh-wh—” He bowed deeply, then in a shaky voice pleaded, “My most sincere apologies. It’s

just, well, you—you seemed too young and—uh—beautiful for the robes. I—uh—I should be going to settle into my room now. Again—deepest regrets.” He bowed once more and departed.

Zagreb lowered his voice. “Apologies indeed, Sindri. My brother has never been one for manners.”

“I suspect he’ll guard his tongue for the duration of our journey. If not, I’ll be certain to further *educate* him in proper etiquette.” She nodded in parting.

Zagreb shuddered then followed, leaving Kibure alone with his own thoughts, and the three newly arrived slaves.

Kibure spared a few glances in their direction, trying to remain inconspicuous. The two slave-born brothers had the typical reddish-brown skin, blond hair, and pale green eyes of the Lugienese slave race like his companions back on the drogal farm. The youngest was not yet very muscular, but he was still relatively stocky and square—at least compared to Kibure’s slender frame. The older of the slave-breeds was full grown and well muscled with broad, rounded shoulders and a thick chest to match. His face was sharp and angular as if chiseled by a sculptor then left unsmoothed. He had wide cheekbones and a large jaw that protruded outward. His hair was probably due for a cut before arriving at auction, but even at this length, it sprouted from his head like the branches of a tree.

The other was of a different seed, and well into his adult years. He had bronze skin and long, shimmering, translucent hair. What stood out most about him was the ridged scar upon his face, which stretched from one ear across the center of his nose all the way to the other ear. Kibure could think of no reason for such a scar to have been created by design, but couldn’t imagine how something like that could happen by chance.

The young slave-breed looked out at the morning fog and whimpered, “Are those w-w-water demons?”

Kibure realized he had not been the only one harboring fears of the fog. He glanced back in the direction of the three slaves who had been tied to a post a few paces away.

A deeper, empathetic voice responded to the pleading question. “No, those are no demons and they can’t hurt you. Just clouds that didn’t make it to the sky in time for the coming day.”

“But how’d a know?” replied the sheepish voice of the first slave.

“Cause demons have been locked up for thousands of years. Klerós bound all the old spirits to the water, never to return. Try as they might, they’ve no power in this part of the world. This fog will be cast away as soon as the sun comes out. You’ll see.”

Kibure was careful to be discreet as he eavesdropped. His previous experience with the slaves from Zagreb’s drogal farm had left little desire for further attempts at friendship. But as the conversation dwindled to whispers, he finally ventured another peek in their direction, only to see three pairs of eyes staring back at him. He averted his eyes in an instant, but couldn’t stop the gasp from escaping his lips. He glanced up again and stammered, “Wh—what?”

The oldest of the group, the true-blood, spoke. “Where’re you from?”

It took a second for Kibure to register the question amid his surprise. Finally he said, “Jar-Jarquin.”

The man nodded. “What’s your name?”

“Kibure.” His mind raced as he attempted to speak and study the three all at once.

The true-blood looked up again and exclaimed, “Demons below! This whole slavery thing has really taken a toll on my manners. Folks call me Grenn and this older-lookin’ fella here is Jengal. And if what they say is true, this younger one here is Tenkoran.”

Kibure nodded.

The man continued, “So what of those who bore you?”

“Huh?” responded Kibure, confused by the question.

“Ya know, where’d your ma and pa come from?”

Kibure flushed. “Oh, I—well—I don’t know. My mother passed when I was born, and I know nothing of my father. I’ve always been here—I mean—there in Jarquin, the drogal farm.”

Grenn looked him up and down. “Well, you’re not of the slave-breed, that’s for sure. Or even a half-blood, like me. I’ve seen many outsiders, but none looked like you.”

*There’s one constant: no one knows where I’m from or why I look so different.*

Grenn continued, “But the world is vast, and I’ve not seen the half of it. Must be from somewhere beyond the Glass Sea, somewhere in Drogen. It’s a much bigger place even than Angolia, so they say.”

He seemed content with this conclusion. “Your name again—Kibber, was it?”

“Kib-*ure*,” Kibure corrected.

The youngest of the slaves, Tenk—something turned his attention to Grenn. “Say, you never said you was only a half-blood.”

Grenn smiled. “Well, you never asked.”

“You let us go on thinking you was a full-on true-blooded Lugiense.”

Grenn laughed. “I can’t be expected to correct all of your assumptions there, Tenk.”

“But you look—”

“I had the fortune of having a true-blooded father.”

Tenk cocked his head to the side. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Well, the looks of children with true-blooded fathers runs strong. That’s why so many of ’em get away with having mistresses, slave or not, and the kids are usually passed off as legitimate. Meanwhile if a true-blood woman does the same—well, it’s very obvious in their children’s appearance.” Grenn shook his head. “Women got the short on that one, to be certain.”

Tenk’s older brother spoke for the first time. “Learn somethin’ new each day.” Shaking his head, he added, “You even have their magic-lookin’ hair. Can’t believe I never made the connection. Not like my master never took a slave in that way. The child was always taken away . . .” He trailed off, then understanding dawned on him. “Then grew up beatin’ us like they wasn’t soiled with our blood.”

Grenn cringed. “Well, it’s not exactly something the Klerós advertises. And the true-bloods like my father do a fine job of hiding it.” Noticing the glare from Jengal and Tenk, Grenn said, “No need to bore daggers into me with your eyes. My father wasn’t rich, and didn’t own no slaves. Nope, I never once whipped one of your kind.”

Kibure grew curious. “So how did you find out you’re not a true-blood? Your pa tell you?”

Grenn’s expression grew distant. “Eventually, yes. Just before he passed. But I had guessed it long before that. If you know what to look for, there are *some* ways to know a half-blood.”

His audience looked on expectantly. He brought a hand to his mouth and whispered, “Skin tone.” Speaking more loudly, he continued, “Mine is slightly off when you compare it with my pa’s.”

Tenk and Jengal studied Grenn.

“Quit it, you two. You can’t tell unless you have us both in the room to compare, and he’s long passed from this world. Anyway, it seems children get at least some of their coloring from their mothers, and most everything else from their fathers. That’s why my skin has a slight bronze to it, as opposed to the olive of my father. But because there are some differences even between western and eastern true-blood Lugienese, it’s not enough to just go by skin tone. You need to compare with the father *and* mother if possible.”

Tenk asked, “So you met your birth mother, then?”

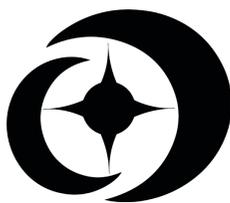
Grenn shook his head. “No. Only the woman who raised me as her own. A true saint she was. No, my father found a slave woman and did the deed to make me, hoping for the son his wife couldn’t give him. Took me away at birth and paid my birth mother to stay away and keep quiet, I guess.”

The conversation continued, but Kibure grew tired of the topic and his mind wandered. His thoughts returned to Sindri and her plan to somehow abscond with him when they reached the markets. Steal him away so she could study the source of his unexplained sorcery. That plan held little appeal; however, if she attempted and failed, they’d likely both be killed.

He slouched back against the metal bars of his cage, pondering once more the unfathomable thought that he had used some sort of magic just days before. He tried again to make sense of that, along with everything else—he couldn't. Each piece was puzzling enough by itself. When combined it all made less and less sense. Where was he from? Why was his mother, a woman from some unknown distant land, traveling through southern Angolia? How had he been able to do—whatever it was he had done? What of the strange nightmares that started afterward? What did all of this mean? Could it be that Zagreb was right, and he really was possessed by one of the Dark Lord's minions? Would he know if he were? He shook his head in frustration.

Looking down at his shackles, he growled in protest and willed himself free of them. Forming fists with his hands, he tensed his arms, flexed his back, and strained with all his might. When they didn't budge, he dug deeper into his inner reservoir of strength and strained once more, but this time he felt—*something*. But that something was the nauseating pain of metal as it cut deep into his pale, weak wrists. He let out a loud, exacerbated breath in defeat. He was no sorcerer.

Shouts from beyond his sight resulted in the beginnings of a rhythmic splashing in the water and the feeling of movement. A faint sense of relief washed over him. Regardless of how things played out in the markets of Sire Trinkanen, at least he was on his way to meet that end.



## CHAPTER 11

# GROBENNAR

[Twenty-Five Years Earlier]

**G**ROBENNAR COULDN'T SEE HIS CAPTIVE'S eyes but he imagined them bulging with fear as his voice squeaked. "Do as he says. Klerós save us, just do it!"

The truth was, Grobennar hadn't had time to digest the fact that he'd already taken a life. Speaking the words aloud caused his resolve to waver. The admission began circulating through his limbs, weakening his grip on the knife. *No. I must be strong.*

Grobennar growled his next statement to mask his fear. "Where is that priest with the child?" Frustrated that no response was forthcoming, Grobennar shouted at the nearest person, a short, pudgy, middle-aged man. "Retrieve the priest at the door. His name is Penden, he has the child."

They entered the room less than a minute later, with the object visible between the folds of Penden's robes. The others in the room straightened as their eyes switched between Grobennar and the object.

The priest held by Grobennar exclaimed, "How can this be? What is it?"

“It is as the prophecy proclaims,” Grobennar replied coldly. “‘The shell of Klerós’s faith shall wrap the Savior in red.’ Few believe it a literal description, yet here it lies before us.” Shifting back to the task at hand, he shouted, “Quickly, prepare the furnace!”

He knew the pathway to greatness and the return of their god lay in the hands of these few men. The Lugiense triumph over the world had been entrusted to them—and to himself.

Speaking to his captive, he asked, “Will you cause me further trouble if I release you?”

“No-no, none at all. Klerós’s will.”

“Good.” He pushed the man away. The pathetic priest sprawled forward onto his face.

“Apologies; this is too important,” said Grobennar.

The priest was busy pleading forgiveness from Klerós for his lack of faith. He didn’t seem to hear.

*“That was quite diplomatic. Not how I would have done it, but it appears to have worked.”*

Grobennar waved Penden over and he felt the shell of the chrysalis. “Hurry, it’s getting cold!” As he watched, an eerie, metallic blue enveloped the fading speckles of red; a sign perhaps that signified the life within was fleeting.

For minutes that felt like hours, the priests pumped the bellows. Grobennar stood still, gazing with wonder at the beauty of the object, like the mother might have done if the birth had gone as planned.

Grobennar released the breath he had been holding. It was time.

One of the others asked, “Are you certain we should place the”—he struggled with the word—“child in the oven? What if the heat destroys it?”

Grobennar simply replied with the verse: “A birth unlike all others, unmarred by the inferno, the cries of our Savior will ring.”

Grobennar opened the door to the furnace and a wave of heat swept over his face as the hot, dry air rushed into the room. Despite the momentary discomfort, he was glad to feel the extreme temperature. He pulled the handle of the heavy slab, which rolled easily on a system

of oiled stones that allowed for human offerings. Without hesitation, he pushed the nearly blue chrysalis into the oven.

The agonizing minutes of silence that followed were punctuated by the occasional lament. “O Klerós, forgive us. We of little faith did not act with haste . . .”

Then a cracking sound shot out from the within the furnace, and they knew something momentous had occurred.

*“Ooooh, I think something happened.”*

“I think everyone thinks that,” whispered Grobennar as he reached for the handle, his hands quivering with anticipation. A bright red light grew stronger as the object emerged. It was nearly blinding once the chrysalis was fully exposed.

The outer casing had cracked, and thick, sizzling, red fluids oozed out. Grobennar’s hands steadied as his confidence grew, as did his voice. “Today we witness beauty beyond all that precedes us!”

The shell melted away, and a living child lay unscathed within the molten fluids, peering up at those around—him—the child was a male. Grobennar recalled the ancient writings of the faith and shouted, “The prophesied bringer of salvation! *He* whose name alone provokes the shining light of Klerós! The Child of Light and Fire lies before us today!”

*“A little on the dramatic side, don’t you think?”*

The child began to cry and wail. Grobennar was no nurse, and the sound grated his ears. He needed to find a wet nurse for the child. But first—

Grobennar scooped up the child and cradled his tiny body as best he could, then he motioned for the oven to be closed. The child’s father had entered at the behest of Tadi Jori, and stood motionless in a shadowed corner of the holy temple. Grobennar called him forth and he lifted his head, still appearing dazed by the entire experience. Grobennar regarded him with an expression of gratitude. “Yes, come forward, ye who sired the Savior of our people.”

The man staggered toward him, still unable to comprehend the magnitude of such a birth or the devastating loss of his beloved.

Grobennar spoke in a low voice, coaxing the man closer. "Yes, that's it. It's all right. You, of all people, deserve to bear witness."

The child's cries were nearly unbearable. *This had better work.* Grobennar beckoned the man closer. "Look into the eyes of our Creator incarnate."

As the man looked on uncertainly, the child's eyes met his. The crying suddenly stopped. Grobennar was unsure how this next step would play out, but he left it to his god. The child's helpless, innocent demeanor changed the moment his gaze locked on that of his father. An unnatural heat swept over the room, like that which might have emanated from the now-closed oven. In an instant, Grobennar sensed the magic and knew.

The child's father fell to his knees, but his eyes remained fixed upon those of the child even as his own steamed and smoked. The man released an inhuman bellow before slumping to the floor. Grobennar stepped closer the father who now lay lifeless, his eyes charred to a crisp. A horrific smell lingered.

*"Quite the temper on this one. You had best stay on his good side."*

There was an awkward silence among the priests who had watched the infant slay a grown man in such grotesque fashion. Grobennar broke the silence with a cheer of triumph. The rest of the priests followed suit, like that of a mindless mob. Jubilation poured from the temple priests as they acknowledged that they would live in the foretold days of great change. The Lugienese Empire's Klerósi prophecy was coming to fruition, and they held the key. The red light from the oven porthole grew brighter as the priests repeated the name they had all been afraid to voice before the ritual was complete. "Magog . . . Magog . . . Magog! On this day, the Child of Light and Fire has been born." The chant morphed slowly into a prayer of thanksgiving, and the furnace became so hot that those standing closest were forced to retreat as their clothes smoked and their sweaty skin sizzled.

The infant let out a gentle giggle as Grobennar wrapped him carefully in red cloth, readying him for the royal palace, the senior high priest, and the second test of fires that he knew this child must face.



## CHAPTER 12

# AYNWARD

**T**HE DOOR CREAKED OPEN. LIGHT blinded Aynward as his eyes struggled to adjust to the change. As the color bled back into his vision, he noted that unlike before, this person wore no disguise. Aynward was still so disoriented that it took him a moment to recognize the familiar face, and when he did, he could hardly believe it: Minster Dolmuevo Humiliab, his life-guide, his savior. Aynward was overwhelmed with joy.

“Dolme! Bless the gods you’re here. I feared I would die here.”

Dolme peered at him with that familiar look of disappointment, his fading hairline accentuating the creases in his forehead. It was the same look he gave Aynward when he completed a mathematical equation incorrectly because he had rushed through it or answered an oral question without thinking. The half smile shadowed by stern, slanted eyebrows and creased forehead told Aynward that Dolme was not pleased and expected some sort of reply.

Aynward’s thoughts shifted to his father, who must have caught wind of the brawl and his disappearance. Aynward had missed his ship and would surely miss the beginning of this year’s classes. It would likely

be a month or so until another ship suitable for royalty would be leaving Salmune for the Isles.

“Aynward, you’ve much to learn about responsibility, duty, and even more to learn about the survival of a young man of royal blood. Your father would be very disappointed to know how you placed yourself in such an irresponsible position among a bunch of lowlifes in a meaningless dockside brawl, especially the night before you were to leave for your schooling. No doubt he’d see this as a direct challenge to his authority. Would you not agree?”

Aynward noted Dolme’s diction carefully. “You ask this question in such a way that it implies that he does not already know. Wasn’t he who sent you to free me from this place?”

Dolme’s smile widened to a sinister grin. “Your father has awarded me certain *liberties* to do with you as I see fit, as long as you’re prepared to service this great kingdom when your schooling is complete.” He extended his arms to indicate the room. “With this flexibility in mind, I have taken the opportunity you provided me. So far as your father is concerned, you boarded your ship and embarked as planned, which is not entirely untrue.”

He leaned on the doorframe and examined his fingernails. “To be honest, I don’t know if he’ll ever hear of it. I brought enough help with me to make sure your friends escaped safely, paid them kindly, and threatened them with their own parental disclosure should anyone hear of it otherwise. However, if King Lupren does catch wind of it, he’ll have plenty of time to cool off before he sees you next.”

Aynward was now truly confused. “What are you talking about?” A potential understanding of what this all meant was starting to form in his mind, but it couldn’t be right. Dolme had always been a stern man, but surely this was just a joke or—

“Wait, are you saying—” Even as words formed, he felt a pit in his stomach. “*You* created this cell? I’ve been held captive here for two or three or however many weeks, tortured, tormented, and drugged—by *you*?”

A rare, wide smile crossed Dolme's face. "Aynward, Aynward, Aynward. You've so much to learn about responsibility." He shook his head. "I fear there was just no other way to teach this lesson quickly enough before arriving in such a dangerous city as Brinkwell. Fear not. We are indeed on board the *Royal Viscery* en route to the Isles, and this is your cabin. Being the concerned counselor that I am, I planned to follow you on your last evening in Salmune to ensure your timely arrival to the ship. I saw you and your pals indulge so heavily in the brew, staggering around the Flowering Bell like fools, which confirmed my fears about how unprepared you were to survive the dangers abroad. Prepared for this eventuality, I quickly went about finalizing one of a dozen potential measures. Couldn't have staged it more perfectly if I'd wanted. You did most of it all on your own."

Aynward lay naked as the day he was born in what he now realized was not a cell but his cabin on board the *Royal Viscery*. His anger at his counselor's words boiled. He would hear no more. He lunged forward with every ounce of strength he could muster.

Dolme, a seasoned swordsman, sidestepped the attack, swept Aynward's feet out from under him, then struck him from behind. Aynward landed facedown, Dolme's knee digging into his back. But this didn't stop the stream of insults and curses issuing from Aynward's lips. After a minute of struggle, his energy faded, and his cries of anger turned to sobs of frustration as he struggled to comprehend his shifting circumstances.

When Aynward calmed down, Dolme released his weight from the boy's back. "A simple thank-you for saving you from your father's wrath would have sufficed. Stay put and I'll send some servants to get you cleaned up. Perhaps someday you'll realize the value of this lesson." He grabbed hold of Aynward's wrists and sliced the rope that bound them.



Aynward emerged on the ship's deck—sponged down and dressed up. The *Royal Viscery* was impressive as far as river-going cargo ships go. The

stern deck concealed three levels below, which consisted of the crew's quarters as well as a mess hall and some cargo space. The hold was filled with freight and food stores. The ship was unique to Dowe not only in that it had three masts but it also retained oarsmen for travel up and down rivers when the wind or current wasn't right. The oarsmen had it easy going downriver. However, the way back to Salmune would be a strenuous trek.

Aynward found Dolme gazing off into the distance on the starboard side, where a vast emptiness existed between Kingdom cities. Aynward guessed they had been traveling for more than three weeks and were approaching the merchant city of Mouthportu. All he could see to the north were the vast, light-green grasslands, marked by hints of pink and purple where flowers bloomed. As they neared Mouthportu, they would begin to see great green forests speckled with black where the Bracken trees grew. Aynward had never seen them firsthand, but had read a great deal about them.

He had come to the deck prepared to confront Dolme once more about the ill treatment he had received. However, the breathtaking landscape rendered him silent. He had hunted a few times with his father and brothers in the mountain forests that lay just east of Salmune, but it was one thing to be within the forest and quite another to see leagues of it from such a great distance.

He was still entranced by the scenery when Dolme spoke. "You've got a good head on your shoulders, you know. But you've much to learn about survival and the real consequences of adulthood in the world. Someday you will have to make important decisions that may affect a great number of people. Getting yourself mixed up with a bunch of brigands and drunkards at that inn was more than foolish. You could have been captured, tortured, ransomed, or killed had I not sent those agents to take you into custody."

Aynward began a defense. "Yes, but—"

"This does not require a response," Dolme interjected. "How far would that explanation get you had you actually been taken hostage by someone who recognized you?" He continued without waiting for

an answer. “Like I said, you’ve a good head, you really do, but you’ve much to learn. Sure, you need the histories and war tactics and philosophies, but most important is simply learning to understand how far your actions stretch beyond your immediate circumstances. For one of royal blood, it is especially crucial that you learn to weigh every decision in light of potential negative outcomes—not only for yourself but for everyone else it may affect. Simply living for the moment and having a good time is not an option for you. There may come times when you have to make split-second decisions without a chance to consider options, and when those times come, you need be in a place where you know you will make the right choice without hesitation.”

A small part of Aynward knew that what Dolme said was true, and shame trickled in. Not liking the way that felt, he clenched his fists and fought against it. No, Dolme had no right to punish him as he did, regardless of his intentions. And so what if he wanted to have a good time with his friends before shipping off to some alien world against his own wishes?

This was quickly becoming another one of Dolme’s trademark lectures. “That is why I did what I did. I wanted to give you time to consider how your poor choices failed you. I hope you will not forget the glimpse of discomfort you felt during this time, not because I wish suffering upon you, but so you will know of suffering and that things could be much worse if you are taken by someone who truly wishes suffering upon you.”

Dolme put a reassuring hand on Aynward’s shoulder but he twisted away. Aynward had nothing to say in response, nothing that wouldn’t result in him being thrown to the deck for another lesson in *respect*. He was livid inside. It was insulting to think that Dolme could think him so dim-witted that he required the experience of suffering in order to understand it. More frustrating was the lack of any ability to enact retribution on the man. Doing so would reveal his own folly, even if Dolme were the main culprit behind it. *He thinks he’s so righteous.*

Aynward went belowdeck to his recently furnished cabin to brood. He lay on his back, swinging slowly in a hammock visualizing his

revenge. This was not the first time, but it was the most vivid yet. He saw it clear as day: Dolme tied up and stripped down. He would be tied to a chair and dragged out into a public square where people would throw rotten food at him. After hours of humiliation, Aynward would walk by and say casually, "Consider how your poor choices have failed you. All actions have consequences."

Aynward would smile and walk away without releasing him. Dolme would plead with him as he turned his back, but his pleas would go unheard. He would remain publicly shamed for the night, knowing Aynward had given him what he deserved, knowing he was not so righteous after all.

Aynward didn't like to let such things fester, but could not let go of this offense. He would not forget it. He continued to dream of revenge until sleep overtook him. He woke up with a headache, and the bitterness turned over in his stomach.



## CHAPTER 13

# KIBURE

**T**HE SOUND OF RENEWED CONVERSATION from the three slaves drew Kibure from his thoughtless stare at the water rippling by the side of the ship.

It turned out that Grenn was quite the teller of tales. Kibure had no reason to disbelieve any of them, but he thought Grenn sure had a lot of stories for one person.

Grenn was boasting of a time he claimed to have met the famed Emperor himself, Magog, a story to steal the attention of anyone in the Lugienese Empire with ears, slave or free man alike.

“I’d been working on the new palace, you see. His Holiness came to inspect the work personally. By mere happenstance I found myself in the very same room.” His eyes went skyward, as if seeing it again for the first time. “He actually spoke to me, you know!”

Jengal let out a light chuckle. “Your stories just keep getting better.”

“Klerós’s truth he did!” insisted Grenn. “I was up on the scaffolding laying brick atop one of the ballroom pillars prior to the priests solidifying it with their magic. All of a sudden, the Exalted One walks in, trailed by several priests and a few architects. I was frozen silly, paralyzed with fear. I mean, what if I dropped something, or made too much

noise, or he didn't like the way the pillar looked before magic polished it? Everyone's heard the rumors. He does not take kindly to flaws or failure."

Kibure wasn't looking in their direction but his peripheral vision picked up two heads nodding agreement.

"But he looked up to where I was and said—and I'll never forget it." He paused for effect. "He said, 'Looks good up there.'"

A sharp intake from Tenk was immediately followed by, "No way!"

When Grenn didn't immediately continue, Tenk asked excitedly, "And then what?"

Grenn seemed surprised by the question. "Oh—well—" He looked from side to side, then said, "He moved on to the other room."

"Oh," said Tenk, enthusiasm draining from his voice.

A bowl of stew surprised Kibure as it banged at the metal bars on its way between them. He had not seen the servant approach from the side. The food was no longer hot, but it was still better fare than the slave slop he had been served at the estate or the dried perversions of it that had been given during the trek to the ship.

Kibure spotted Grenn watching him with curiosity as he struggled with his shackled hands to awkwardly spoon the slop into his mouth. "Kibure. I've been thinking. You must be quite the feisty one. Chains while inside a metal cage!" He giggled. "Smallest of all the slaves here, yet you're strapped in steel twice over!"

Kibure just shrugged and forced a smile. "My musco is a cautious man."

"Cautious is an understatement! I'd say paranoid!"

Kibure commented no further, and Grenn left the topic alone.

As the day dragged by, Kibure warmed to the nearby slaves. Listening to Grenn's stories helped pass the time.

Kibure finally asked, "Grenn, how is it that you have visited so many places within the Empire?"

Grenn took on a faraway look before replying. "Well, when I was a free man, a laborer, I learned several skills in my travels to find whatever work I could. Sad to say, I never settled. I guess I was always looking for

something new, something different.” He sighed. “Never found what I was looking for, but I sure did see a lot of the world along the way.”

“But how then are you now a slave? Someone find out you were a half-blood?”

If Grenn had a faraway look before, this question sent him to another world entirely. “No, nothin’ like that. But I did work alongside many slaves over the years. And guessing my own heritage, I came to believe that these slaves were not the ferocious, beastly fools they were said to be. They’re just a conquered people like any other. On my last job, up in the mountains of Surin, where I met these two louts”—he jerked his thumbs at Jengal and Tenk—“I witnessed a musco beating his slave. After a while, I couldn’t take it any longer. The slave was nearly dead. I told the musco that the poor soul had had enough.” Grenn shook his head. “I wasn’t looking for a fight, but this savage was already in a rage. He rounded on me and swung the whip.”

Kibure’s eyes went wide with disbelief as Grenn continued.

“And he didn’t stop at one swing. He kept swinging. He left me no choice but to fight back. I finally caught the thing in my hand.” He displayed a white scar across the palm where the corrugated whip’s rough, studded surface had opened his skin. “I yanked it from his grasp, and I guess I lost my wits in the heat of it and struck him one time too many. He never woke up. Worse yet, Bragden—Tenk and Jengal’s musco—arrived on the scene just in time to see the fatal blow. He had me marked, bound, and crated until such time as he could sell me off into slavery, where I’ll remain for the rest of my days.”

He stared at his hands as he spoke, then looked up and pointed to the ridged mark on his face that Kibure had noticed earlier. “That’s why I bear this scar. If ever I were to escape, and be free of a master, I’d be seen for what I am and put to death as a runaway.”

The pain in Grenn’s eyes was clear as he told the story, but his expression was hard, having accepted the finality of it.



The next morning, as the barge pushed upstream toward the city of Sire Haas, the slaves continued to pass the time with light chatter. This time it was Tenkoran who spoke. “I remember playing a game of finders with a friend, Dex. Not only did I go the ninety breaths without being found, but while in hiding I uncovered a stash of dried fruit our musco had set aside. I managed several mouthfuls before Musco Bragden barged in to catch me red-handed.”

Tenk smiled wide. “It was well worth the treat.” He turned his wrists up in front of him to reveal the price: several raised scars. “Have you ever had dried fruit, Kibure?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s marvelous. If heaven really exists, I’ll bet it has plenty. And if not, it should!”

The day disappeared amid a steady flow of stories and chatter. Before Kibure knew it, two meals had passed and it was dark again, and his eyes were fluttering in their attempt to remain open. And then he was asleep.



When Kibure opened his eyes, he was quick to recognize that he was not truly awake. The familiar eerie silence gave it away now that he knew what to look for, or, rather, listen for. He had returned to that same nightmare. His nerves quivered as he struggled to orient himself within the unnatural place between true sleep and wakefulness.

Like before, his surroundings mirrored that of the waking world—minus color and sound. He looked over to where the others *should* have been but saw nothing. Except—no—it wasn’t entirely nothing. As he regarded this area more closely, he realized he could see translucent outlines similar to what he had observed when Sindri had been standing in front of him in the real world before he woke. There was also the faintest speck within each distortion, a faint wisp of something opaque, a gray sliver. *I don’t like this.*

That thought reminded him, however, that he had managed to escape from his confines on that night before waking. But how had he done so? He could feel the metal bars, not exactly cold upon his skin, but his mind registered their lifeless presence holding him upright. Had it been fear that drove him last time? Determination? If this were truly a dream, maybe he could do things that he would ordinarily be unable to do in the real world. *Worth a try*. Bracing himself, he pushed against the bars.

Nothing happened.

Kibure frowned. *This makes no sense*. He supposed that was sort of a rule for dreams, but it was still frustrating. Most things in the real world made little sense so he should have expected little better here in his dreams.

Nevertheless he tried again, this time straining even harder than before.

Nothing.

What was it that had allowed him to escape before? An idea formed in his mind, and while it seemed rather foolish, he decided what better place to rely on such things than a dream? He concentrated on simply *willing* himself free of the bars. He stared at the wood planks just beyond the bars, closed his eyes, and imagined himself there. He opened his eyes slowly, hoping to find himself standing beyond his bars.

He wasn't.

He tried again, focusing everything he could muster. Then he heard a voice, or, rather, sensed the words of a voice in his mind. "*You should keep from the world of dream while so close to the darkness.*"

His eyes snapped open, and he looked from side to side but he saw no one there. He tried to say something back, but like before, no sound was forthcoming.

*"Ah, you do not yet know how to will your words to life from within this place. This is just as well, for now. Your soul is not safe, here or in the waking world. Should you ignore this warning, know that you need only will yourself somewhere, visualize, and believe, and it will be so. It is much the same to speak into the mind of another while here."*

A thousand questions sprang into Kibure's mind and he continued to look about for the source of the voice. "Who are you? Where are you? What is this place?" He willed those questions to go forth from his mind, but he was certain none did so. He was completely impotent here.

*"I must go. I risk much in coming to these dark lands, even in dream. You too must keep from this place if you hope to survive. We will wait for your foretold arrival to the east in the—"*

The voice was cut off by the sudden sensation of—

His eyes snapped open and he shouted into the waking world. His body tingled with a thousand pinpricks—magic. Thick beads of sweat rolled down his face.

Turning his head to the left, he saw the outline of a woman—Sindri. It was too dark to see her features clearly, but her posture suggested a scowl.

Sindri tsked, then whispered, "You were using magic again, little tazamine."

She turned her head and the moon's faint light exposed a slight smile, but like a stone thrown into the air, it was quickly pulled down. Then she frowned as she turned back to face him, her expression disappearing into the shadows once more. "The aura you put out during your sleep tonight was strong enough to wake me from my own slumber. Alas Kibure, you can no longer deny me the *full* truth. This places both of us at risk."

Kibure sat stunned and silent. Sindri continued. "Come morning, we *will* discuss this, one way or another. Mind you, one way will involve far less pain than the other, but the choice remains yours."

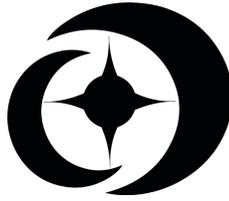
Kibure remained speechless, due to the undeniability of his nightmares as well as Sindri's threat.

She turned to leave, then stopped to face him once again.

"And Kibure, please choose the former. I'd really like for us to be frie—well, perhaps that's not the right term. I'd like us to be cooperative affiliates, both sides benefiting to some degree or another. I worry that torture may strain what could otherwise be a very healthy relationship."

She tilted her head to one side for an instant. “I promise you that in spite of your fear of me, life with me will be better than what you had with Zagreb. Hell, when I’ve learned what I can from you, I may even set you—” She looked over and saw the three other slaves, awake and all staring in their direction, well lit by the light of the moons. “We’ll discuss this further once I’ve made the necessary arrangements. You just think upon what you’re going to say when next we speak.”

She had turned enough that her face was again visible in the light of the moons. Her mouth curved up at the edges, forming a perverted smile. “You help me, and I’ll help you.” Then Sindri slinked her way around the corner, leaving a trembling Kibure alone with his thoughts.



## CHAPTER 14

# GROBENNAR

**M**AGOG'S VOICE WAS A DEEP growl, yet it remained smooth to the ear, a more imposing sound after Grobennar's last encounter with the volatile God-king.

Grobennar remained where he was, kneeling, awaiting the God-king's instruction. He could feel himself scowling. Rajuban's attendance at this meeting was yet another affront to Grobennar's station, and a clear threat to his position of favor with the God-king. Grobennar did not like it one bit.

"Fatu Mazi." Grobennar was surprised to hear his own formal title from the God-king. "We must act before the agent of the Dark Lord is upon us. It is evident that this evil approaches our doorstep. I felt his presence once again, stronger still than before. We must do everything within our power to extinguish this threat to Klerós's plan and the prophesied redemption of his creation, Doréa. I would trust none other than you, Fatu Mazi, with this task."

*Why the sudden reverence?* wondered Grobennar.

"This task is, of course, not without its risks."

*Of course.* Grobennar cringed. This was not good, especially if the plan truly originated with Mazi Rajuban.

Grobennar and Rajuban had been at odds since their time together decades earlier in the priesthood. The man had always been jealous of Grobennar's favor with Magog. It seemed to Grobennar that Raj had finally gained an advantage in their game of intrigue, a game Grobennar was not accustomed to losing.

Rajuban's serpentine voice goaded him. "Brother, you look tense. Fear not. The God-king has asked me to be in attendance for today's meeting merely to lend my expert skill in aiding his spell casting." He stepped forward and opened his arms before the both of them, a mockingly holy gesture considering the man Grobennar knew him to be. He continued, "After all, we wouldn't wish to see anything go wrong with the casting. One stray thought during the process could leave you dead or, worse yet, impotent. I don't think anyone would wish to see that. This great empire needs you."

*"Can't just bludgeon him to death? No one would suspect someone of your magical ability to resort to such mundane methods."*

*If only,* wished Grobennar.

"Truer words were never spoken," replied Grobennar wryly. "Your willingness to advise and aid the God-king is commendable. Though I can't help but wonder if this decision might be rash. I have long held that any verdict of importance not come without adequate consultation with Klerós, and those closest to Klerós's will."

Rajuban smiled. "I could not agree more. The God-king and I have been working over the particulars of this spell, and praying for the signs to use it for a number of months. Klerós has delivered both to us."

*"He's really outdone you this time, Grobes."*

"Of course you have. This is well. Klerós guides both of you."

That venomous snake had been working from within the shadows for months before striking. What could he say that would not cause himself further harm in the face of the God-king? Nothing. He could only pray this spell didn't actually kill or maim him.

"So what is this spell intended to do, exactly?" asked Grobennar, hoping it wasn't as dangerous as they were making it out to be.

Rajuban answered again for Magog. “This spell will replicate the God-king’s blessed ability to sense magic more acutely, if only temporarily. We could not grant any mortal man the ability to wield as he does, but a temporary expansion of the ability to sense magic is possible. Based on our experiments, this ability will come close to that of the God-king himself.”

“Tried this on yourself, have you?”

Rajuban chuckled. “Demons no! We took on a crop of young, willing priests with the talent to seek, though none with a strong talent. These were all—expendable. Rest assured, our last two attempts succeeded without complication.”

*Comforting.*

Magog spoke, “Let us be on with it. We have other matters to attend to this day.”

Rajuban nodded and allowed his triumph to leak through his expression.

Grobennar considered Jaween’s last suggestion for a moment. He knew things were dire when he actually considered one of Jaween’s deranged plans. *If only.*

Magog placed his hands upon Grobennar’s shoulders and began to hum.

*“Oooh no. This seems like such a bad idea. And yet to ignore your Lord after what happened last time would be far perilous—er? A grand predicament, indeed.”*

Grobennar ignored Jaween as a swirl of energies shot through him. It was pain beyond anything he had ever felt, a deep, inexplicable jolt within his mind and chest, a burning so hot he wondered if he might combust from within. He tried to wriggle free, but he could not. Dark images, swirls of black and red light, did battle before his closed eyes. None of his priestly training prepared him for the pain that coursed through his body, growing steadily more intense until his mind could no longer able to bear it, and his ability to stand failed. He slumped forward, awareness fading as he fell headlong into an abyss of nothingness.



## CHAPTER 15

# AYNWARD

**A**YNWARD AWKWARDLY EXTRICATED HIMSELF FROM the hammock of his cell-turned-cabin and cursed the pain in his back.

*Gods! How can anyone get used to sleeping in one of these things?*

The sleep-deprived Aynward longed for nothing more than to collapse into the soft, pillowy comfort he knew remained back in Salmune, years now from his grasp.

Thoughts of his increasingly distant home brought back a shower of memories. Aynward had never been close to his family, with the exception of his sister, Dagmara, but he still ached at the thought of being so far from them. He cringed at his weakness, and attempted to brush those thoughts aside, recalling that his brothers were now occupied with the responsibilities of adulthood and his sister prepared for marriage. In fact, her wedding would likely be the next time he saw her.

Even he and his sister had begun the slow departure from childhood friendship as she entered into her training for womanhood. Yet he still counted her one of his closest friends. Often he had sneaked off to go riding with her in the royal pastures, and he had secretly taught her the basics of the sword, because women were prohibited from such activity. Yet she desired deeply to learn. He could see her light-auburn hair

flow as she twirled about with the wooden sparring weapon. He nearly laughed as he recalled how angry she became when she didn't score so much as a hit on her younger brother. A foolish frustration considering he'd been forced to practice nearly every day while at school, while she had barely practiced more than a dozen times, in secret. Aynward's smile faded as he reflected on the loneliness he would endure for the next several years while away from everyone he'd ever known.

Then voice from above caught Aynward's attention. "Land ahoy!"  
*Gods be blessed! No more hammock!*



Aynward watched in awe as the *Royal Viscera* sailed into Brinkwell's expansive bay. The late midday sun gave the city, beautiful on its own, an almost mystical appearance.

Brinkwell was arguably the most important cities of trade in all of Doréa. This was one of the few places where direct exchanges between Angolian and Drogenese merchants existed on friendly terms, as enforced by the presence of Kingdom patrols.

Brinkwell's size was impressive in and of itself, but what made it more remarkable was the way the ground gently sloped upward from the bay, creating an appearance similar to the amphitheaters common in Scritler. Leagues of city rose up from the bay in all directions from the hub of trade that began at the docks. Aynward was amazed by the sight, in spite of his recollection that Salmune was actually a more populous city. However, the intensity of activity here was like nothing he'd ever before seen.

The *Royal Viscera* slowed to a near halt at the major dock in Brinkwell and ropes were thrown to the waiting dock crew, who pulled them into position so they could unload.

Aynward finally snapped out of his trance when Dolme slapped him on the back. "Ready to begin your true education?"

"Ready as I can be." His voice was intentionally devoid of mirth. He was unwilling to indulge his captor any more than necessary.

He looked around at the bustle of the city and tried not to allow it to overwhelm him. While he was unwilling to demonstrate any eagerness in front of Dolme, he had decided that he'd try to make the most of the situation. But Dolme would not be proven right by seeing Aynward enjoy his experience here. Not after what he'd done to him.

The docks were not much different from those back in Salmune, save for the fact that they extended for leagues around a significantly larger bay.

Dolme sent a messenger to alert the man who had agreed to show them to their residence upon arrival. The messenger returned minutes later with Kuerton, who greeted them at the dock with a few servants to handle their baggage. Kuerton walked with his entire upper body leaning back awkwardly, which Aynward assumed must have been necessary to support his robust belly. More than his odd posture, though, it was his eyes that gave the man a comedic appearance. The way they rested in his eye sockets gave him a beady, nervous appearance.

"Your things will be transported to your residence. I've arranged for us to walk so as to better familiarize the two of you with the city. I hope this will not be taken in offense by his majesty." Kuerton said all of this with unusual emphasis on certain syllables, lowering and elevating the pitch of his voice to accompany his words. His mode of speech alongside his appearance made him seem to Aynward a caricature from some roving street show act. Had Aynward been in better spirits, he'd have started laughing right then and there.

"That will be acceptable," said Dolme. "But I would ask that you not refer to this young man as 'majesty' but simply 'Annard.' While he's here, he is merely a student of little significance and we would prefer his identity remain unknown."

Kuerton raised an eyebrow. "Very well, then, Annard, and . . ." He paused, scanning his memory. "Ah yes, Dolme." He leaned in and spoke more quietly. "Apologies, I took special note of the informal offshoot of Dolmuevo, then went and nearly forgot it when I needed it."

Dolme appeared neither amused nor angry, just nodded for the man to continue with their introduction to the city.

Kuerton cleared his throat, visibly uncomfortable now. “So . . . Annard and Dolme, if you would please follow me, we should be on our way. I have arranged for us to have a hot meal at a place only slightly off the way to your residence. It will be a thirty-minute walk.”

Dolme gestured with his head for the man to lead on.

Kuerton nodded, giving both of them a wry, quirky smile. “All right, then, let’s be off.” He turned and started down the dock toward the city.

As he followed, Aynward noticed the unusually thin robe the man wore. It was nearly transparent. He wore dark trousers and no shirt beneath the see-through robe. Aynward gathered it was the pride of people to flaunt their rotund bellies for all to see. *What a strange place.*

As they began their ascent into the city, Aynward expected strange looks from people noting him a foreigner, but no one took notice. He observed no homogenous look to the people. They seemed to come from all over Doréa.

Aynward also noticed that the docks were much less inviting when up close. He could see all of the clutter and imperfections of busy store-rooms and lower-class housing. The first few blocks were warehouses with a smattering of inns, brothels, taverns, or combinations of all three. Despite its clutter and busyness, it was not completely repulsive. He found it interesting how different it looked up close compared with the glistening midday panorama from the deck of the *Royal Viscera*. Yet the breeze coming in from the Glass Sea removed much the expected stench. Aynward recalled the stagnant, stinking air around the docks back home and shook his head. *Brinkwell has at least something going for it.*

After a few minutes of walking on small, hard-packed side streets, they reached a wide, busy avenue that made a straight line into the heart of the city. They turned right and walked up this street for another ten minutes. Aynward was surprised at the quick pace set by their plump guide. He and Dolme struggled to match his speed.

The street reminded Aynward a little of home, though it was busier and much more diverse. Several large, cow-like animals pulled wagons and carts full of food and trade items.

“Be sure to stay to one side or the other,” Kuerton shouted over the bustling sounds of the awakening city. “Many have lost limbs and lives to the wagon drivers. They’ve places to go, and they will not stop or slow down for the meandering pedestrian.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” Aynward mumbled as he merged further to the left. Kuerton maintained a reserved equanimity about him as they walked, speaking only when pointing out hazards or landmarks. He indicated several temples of varying religions, which was another oddity, because there was only one faith in the Kingdom. All others were deemed heretical, though devout faith was by no means a driving force within Dowe society, not like in Scritland to the south where the government and religious leaders were as one. Therefore, Aynward thought it odd to find so many faiths in one place.

He pondered this notion as they walked, and settled on a theory. In a place with refugees and travelers from all over the world, many different religious establishments were required to accommodate them. He’d heard of other religions to the far south, as well as many more in the Isles and west in Angolia, all with their own unique gods and cultic beliefs. He’d just never considered them all existing peacefully within the same city. He was struck again by the alien nature of this place.

They passed several bustling marketplaces filled with the shouts of merchants and buyers alike. Kuerton spoke as they passed one of them. “These central markets sell everyday supplies and food for the people living within a short walk. The Grand Market lies ten minutes east of here—about ten minutes south of where you’ll be staying, if you’d like to see it. It is without question the most spectacular place to visit if you’ve got the coin and you’re into rare items, luxury, relics, exotic pets, food . . . the list goes on and on, my friends. If there is something you want, or need, I assure you it is there.” He smiled at them with his beady little black eyes. “However, you may want to have someone who knows their way around if you hope to find what you’re looking for. The market is quite large, crowded, and confusing to the foreigner. You could spend an entire week going to every stand or merchant and not see the same one twice. I would be glad to escort you sometime. You have but to call

on me.” When neither Aynward nor Dolme responded, he shrugged. “Of course, you’ll have plenty of time to explore at your leisure.”

They continued their ascent, and Aynward’s legs began to ache. They’d been walking a steady incline for what had seemed like the entirety of their journey through the city. He tried to distract himself from the pain by paying closer attention to what he saw as they walked. The buildings within this sector of the city looked older but better maintained, and the architecture was almost completely alien to him. Where the buildings around the docks fit right into his architectural schema, these were like a brand-new language.

He looked up ahead and saw a great stone serpent whose body below the neck looked like that of the wolves that often fed on sheep back home. It extended from the stone wall that served as the entrance. The pillars and sacrificial stone tablets out front made it obvious that this was another religious temple. Aynward had no idea what religion it represented, but felt certain he should keep his distance. He was glad when Kuerton turned east down another side street just before the temple.

Dolme turned and whispered to Aynward, “Quite a strange specimen, ah?”

Before Aynward had time to decide to ignore Dolme’s attempt at conversation out of spite, Kuerton wheeled around and placed a hand on both Dolme’s and Aynward’s shoulders. His pudgy face hardened as he whispered to them. “Careful what you say about the temples here. Although the religions appear to live harmoniously within this city, evil lurks in the shadows. It’s best not to voice such thoughts about the temples or the people while here.”

Aynward noted a hint of fear in his eyes as they darted about. Then Kuerton smiled his strange smile again. “Not to worry, though. These things happen only on occasion. Just a minor precaution, but I’d be a poor guide if I didn’t at least mention it.”

As Kuerton turned, Aynward felt a strange tingling chill throughout his body. Yet he had no goose bumps; in fact, he felt like he was about to break a sweat. He was overcome by the uncomfortable sense that he was being watched. But when he turned, he saw only the bustle of people

along the main corridor continuing along their paths. He shook off the jitters and tried to stop thinking about what Kuerton had just said.