

## CHAPTER 1

The Old Magic that had veiled the Guardian Grotto for four hundred years had failed.

*Failed.*

Mikel must have spoken that ominous word aloud, for the scout standing in front of him looked up sharply.

“Sir?”

“Nothing.” The High Commander sank down on the stool behind the map table. “Proceed with your report, Jeru.”

The young scout had ridden hard. His hair was disheveled, his cloak wrinkled and dirt stained. The sharp smell of heat, exertion, and horse sweat warned Mikel that the news was so dire that Jeru had not yet taken the time to wash.

“Sir. Ruan and I were patrolling the Outer Peaks, past the Cutter Crag. That would have been” —his brow furrowed in concentration— “ten days ago.”

“And?”

“From one of the high ridges to the west, you get a view past the Peaks.”

“Yes.” Mikel imagined exactly where his men had stood. He knew these mountains intimately, every crest and valley and slope of beloved hill. He had patrolled them once as a young Warrior and, even as High Commander, had led his men through them on more occasions than he could even remember.

“We saw movement, sir. Men on horseback at Two Plague Pass.”

“*On the pass?*” Shock jarred through Mikel. This was worse than he had thought.

“Only a few men on the pass, but they have definitely found it.”

“These men? Were they dressed in the colors of Gwyndorr’s Lord?”

“No, Commander.” Jeru looked down and swallowed. “They were dressed in the colors of Tirragyl. They were king’s men.”

*By the abyss.* Lord Lucian hadn’t come alone. He had brought the royal army. And they had found the pass that had not been breached since the time of King Destaus, hundreds of years before.

“Did you get a sense of their number, Jeru?” Mikel’s calm tone came from years of command.

“On the pass we counted about fifteen, sir. But . . .” Jeru’s hesitation warned Mikel of the bad news to follow, “we climbed the western peak for a better view of the low ground.”

“And?”

“Hundreds of men are massing there under the royal banner, sir. With more men and supplies arriving as we left to bring you the news.”

“Thank you, Jeru.” Mikel rose. “You and Ruan did well to bring the news so fast.”

“Sir.” The Warrior placed his fist on his heart and bowed slightly before turning to leave the war chamber.

When he was alone again, Mikel dropped back onto his seat, closed his eyes and imagined himself standing on the same windy western peak where Jeru had stood ten days earlier. Far below him the valley floor churned with the dark figures of soldiers, purple banners whipping above their heads. The Parashi’s ancient enemy, the House of Taus, drew near.

He opened his eyes and leaned over the giant map stretched out on the table. His finger traced the line of the Outer Peaks until it came to rest on Two Plague Pass. A place of legend. Of victory. It was the pass that could not be found by the enemy, the pass that had kept them safe all these years. And on the single occasion in which it *was* breached, mythical foghounds had come to fight the enemy, or

so the legends said. Even as a child Mikel had disbelieved the story. He knew that swords, not foghounds, fought Highborn invaders.

But the one thing Mikel *had* placed his faith in was the shielding power of the Guardian Rock. Until Shara had arrived. Fleeing Gwyndorr when Lord Lucian sought to bind her to his son in marriage, Shara had sought shelter at the Guardian Grotto. Her companions—the monk Andreo, the old man Eliad, and the groom Nicho—had not known that she carried with her a powerful and dangerous Cerulean Dusk Dreamer. Mikel had only realized it when Lord Lucian used the girl’s dreams to briefly breach the Grotto’s defenses. Although Mikel had confiscated the rock, he had not hidden it well enough, and its powerful allure had drawn Shara once more. In her final dream, Lord Lucian infiltrated the Guardian Grotto long enough to know exactly where it lay.

Mikel finally had to acknowledge with his heart what his head knew the day the Dusk Dreamer took full possession of Shara. Their Old Magic defense had been breached. They were no longer hidden, no longer safe. War was upon them.

Mikel’s finger followed the Erridale River, the most likely route that the king and his army would take once they crossed the pass. At the confluence point, where the Feyn River split into the Erridale and Jabal Rivers, he stopped. Here the king could take two routes. One, the more direct route, followed the Feyn to Rogue’s Neck, where the river cut through the Inner Peaks. From there it was mere days to the waterfall that veiled the Grotto. Mikel’s eye fell on the other place where the Inner Peaks could be breached. Called Waif’s Cleft, it had been discovered by a young Parashi boy at the time of the Hundred Year War. A narrow path winding between two tall mountains, it was even better hidden than Two Plague Pass. Once through Waif’s Cleft, an enemy could make their way straight to the Elam Highlands. The Guardian Grotto had an opening onto this plateau.

Mikel had commanded the Parashi Warriors for many years. He had led raids on Highborn lands, fought royal troops in clashes when the old king’s cruelty threatened the Parashi. He had protected his people, their ancient writings, and the Guardian Rock, here, in

the depths of the earth. He had trained younger men to fight and protect. Yet Mikel knew that they were no match for the full force of the king's army. Had only Lord Lucian come with the men of Gwyndorr, they would have stood a chance against them. Even if they killed this army, thousands more would follow. The king could call every man in Tirragyl into service. The Parashi Warriors would be annihilated, the Old Writing destroyed, and the memory of the Parashi wiped from the face of the earth.

Mikel clenched his hand into a fist and smashed it down on the map over Two Plague Pass, wishing he had the power to crush the king's army with a single blow. If he could do that, he would not have to send his men to their deaths.

Pearce pushed open the door to the war chamber just as Mikel smashed his fist down on the map. Unease crept through Pearce. The High Commander was always in control and seldom vexed or angry. The scout's news must have been dire indeed.

"Sir?" he said quietly from the door. "I heard the scouts came with news?"

"Yes, Pearce." Mikel straightened, and instantly the control was back in his voice and posture. "Call the other commanders to the war chamber."

"Yes, sir."

Pearce hastened to the barracks and dining hall to call the other commanders to the war chamber. They returned to find Mikel quietly studying the map.

"Sit, men." Mikel waited for the commanders to find a place at the long table before he continued. "I have just heard from a scout that the king's army was gathering at Two Plague Pass about ten days ago."

*Two Plague Pass?* Pearce felt a stab of fear. The pass had not been found for hundreds of years. He saw the collective dismay on the other commanders' faces.

"It will take them time to traverse the pass with their supplies and

horses,” the High Commander continued. “But we must assume the worst. They could be as far as the Cutter Crags by now.”

*By the abyss!* Their enemy had breached the Outer Peaks. It was unthinkable.

Mikel pointed to the map. “If they follow the river through Rogue’s Neck, they could be here within two weeks. We cannot let that happen.”

“What do we do, Commander?” Pearce asked.

“We must delay them in the mountains like our forefathers did when the Highborn invaders first came all those hundreds of years ago. We know these mountains better than they do. We use that to our advantage.”

“Skirmishes, you mean?” Pearce couldn’t keep the skepticism from his voice.

“Yes. We attack and retreat. We worry them like a fly worrying a grubear. We draw them off their path and into the hills where we can pick them off, and then we slink away again. We might not be able to push them back, but we keep them at bay, busy chasing their own tails. At least till winter comes, when the snow will hopefully force them to retreat.”

“With respect, sir, it’s the way cowards fight,” Pearce said. “Let’s fight them face-to-face. Give them a battle they will never forget.”

The other commanders stirred in agreement.

“There are too many,” Mikel said. “We will be slaughtered. Then who will protect the Grotto?”

“But we would all die like true Warriors, courageous and unconquered!” Pearce was on his feet, his sword above his head as he cried the words. “If all we do is chase them away, they will be back again.”

“Sit down, Pearce,” Mikel said. “This is not a discussion. It is an order. I am putting you in charge of three of our five units. You will take them into the mountains and keep the king’s army at bay by employing skirmish tactics. The remaining men will stay to guard the Grotto and Deep Caves.”

“You are not leading the Warriors, sir?” It made no sense to Pearce. This was the greatest threat the Warriors had ever faced, and

they needed the High Commander to lead them, not hide in the Grotto with the women and children.

“I will be in charge of the men guarding the caves,” Mikel replied, lowering his gaze to the map.

Pearce tried one more time. “Sir, I really think you should . . .”

“That’s all,” Mikel said sharply. “Ready yourself today. Tomorrow you lead the men into the mountains.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, Pearce, station some men at Waif’s Cleft. It would be a dangerous place for them to breach.”

“Of course, sir.”

As they rose to leave, Mikel said, “There will be another meeting in the gathering hall tonight. You are invited to attend.”

“Invited or commanded to come?” Pearce had never spoken to the High Commander in such a tone, but he still smarted from Mikel’s sharp words. And—truth be told—the High Commander had just dropped in Pearce’s estimation.

“Invited.” The High Commander’s gaze held his own, and there was a flicker of sadness in it, as if Pearce’s words grieved him. “During the Hundred Year War, Warriors were sent off with words of encouragement and hope on the eve of great battles. We will rekindle the old tradition.”

As he left the war chamber, Pearce thought that words of hope were a useless substitute for what Mikel should be giving them: his sword.

The horses were restless this morning although Nicho whispered to them that all would be well. He suspected the animals sensed if you did not believe the words yourself. The Grotto had been a place of unease from the day he arrived back here with Jed, Rosa, Simhew, and the liberated rifters. No wonder, for they prepared for war.

Earlier two scouts had ridden in. Nicho could tell they had set a particularly grueling pace because their mounts, heads down and nostrils flared, showed signs of extreme fatigue. As he grabbed one of the reins, the words of reprimand were already on his tongue. But

just then he looked at the face of the man leaping from his horse's back. His expression was strained, his eyes filled with apprehension. Nicho said nothing. The news the men bore was obviously urgent. Urgent enough for them to push their treasured mounts to the limit.

"Easy, boy." Nicho tried to soothe Crypin, Pearce's large grey stallion, who was snorting and pawing the ground. "Easy. You're a leader, boy. You need to set a good example." He stroked the stallion's broad nose and, for a moment, the horse stilled. "Good. Good. You're a warhorse, remember? Fearless, that's you."

"Ko?"

Nicho turned to see Jed standing against the stable wall, his serious face watchful and wary. How Nicho wished he could turn back time to when Derry was still alive. Then, Jed's face had lit up at the mere promise of a tickle from his father. Now, his father was dead and his mother lost in the backstreets of Gwyndorr. As much as Nicho and Rosa tried to fill the spaces in Jed's life, pain and mistrust were etched in those dark eyes.

"Jed." He bent down, fighting the urge to pull the boy into his arms. The boy did not like being held. "Do you want to give Crypin a stroke? I can lift you so you can reach."

Jed shook his head.

"I thought you were with Simhew this morning, learning your letters."

"Simhew is running arrows for Uncle Pearce."

"Errands, you mean?" Nicho smiled. "Did you find me all by yourself?" It was an impressive feat for a boy of less than five. The stables were far from the living area in the Grotto, near the back of the caves. "You've come such a long way, you might as well help me. Grab that bucket over there, and let me fill it with some feed."

The boy obeyed quietly, helping Nicho with the feeding. Nicho was pleased to see that he seemed unafraid of the horses looming above his head. They were gentle around him, responding to his innate stillness.

When they had done the rounds, Nicho sat on the ground and patted the straw next to him. "Time for us to have a little something too." He tore a piece of bread husk and gave it to Jed, who ate in

silence. Nicho remembered sitting in the stable with Shara at Randin's house and eating bright-red apples, grown in the fertile land around Gwyndorr. He longed for fresh food and his mother, Marai's, aromatic cooking. The food in the Grotto was plain, unadorned, and seldom fresh. Food for soldiers.

"Do horses cry?" Jed's voice broke through Nicho's memories.

"Uh, no . . . but they do get sad."

"Is the grey one sadder than the others?"

"Ah." Understanding dawned. "No, Crypin isn't called that because he cries. It's just an old Parashi name. Like Lian." He saw the boy stiffen and realized his mistake. Lian was the name Jed had given to the last toy his father had carved him before he left for good. The toy that Hildah had sold when they were desperate for food. Nicho quickly continued. "We Parashi have the bravest horses in the world because we train them and treat them so well."

"So we can beat the bad lord when he comes?" Jed's dark eyes looked intently into his own, older and wiser than such young eyes were meant to be.

"We will try, Jed. We will be very brave, and we will try."



## CHAPTER 2

Shara awoke. The dread that had been coiling inside her these last few days had tightened in her chest as she slept. Today they reached the Rif'twine, that forest whose evil darkness stole through Tirragyl. But they would do more than reach it. They would walk right into its heart, if Eliad was to be believed. The old man spoke of a path through the forest. He called it the poison tree path.

She lay a long time listening to his and Andreo's soft breathing. Nothing yet stirred to life, although a lightening on the horizon hinted that dawn was near. Shara rolled from under the blanket she shared with her companions and felt her way to the still-warm embers of the fire. She blew on them before carefully arranging some branches on the softly glowing coals. It took time, but finally small flames licked the dry wood.

She held her hands over the flames, trying to rub warmth back into her icy fingers. If it was this cold *out* of the forest, how would it be once they were trapped in that dark, shadowed world?

A flash of red and shimmer of gold caught the corner of her eye. Before she looked up, she knew what it meant. *The Gold Breast had come*. Trepidation and joy tangled uneasily within her as she hurried to Eliad's side and shook him by the shoulder.

"Eliad. Tabeal is here."

"Tabeal!" The old man sat up groggily, but his face lit into a smile as the bird came to settle on his shoulder. "You are just in time, my friend. Today we reach the path."

The majestic bird let out one pure note, and briefly joy broke through Shara's disquiet . . . until she remembered. The last time the Gold Breast had come to her, she had been caught in the endless dark dream brought on by the Cerulean Dusk Dreamer. Even though the Gold Breast had freed her that day, the damage had been wrought. Through her and the power rock, the Guardian Grotto had been breached, perhaps even destined to destruction. A familiar shame washed over her as she stared at the bird.

"On time for what?" Andreo pushed himself onto one arm, yawning as he rubbed his eyes.

The Gold Breast flew from Eliad's shoulder to the place where the book lay encased in its oilskin wrapping.

"Time for the telling, I suspect." Eliad stretched out and lifted the book to his lap.

Shara had taken many a turn carrying that heavy book from the Guardian Grotto. At times she cursed the day she and Nicho had uncovered it in the Silver Birch Grove outside Gwyndorr's gates. Since that day the book, written in the Old Tongue, had been nothing but a heavy weight to add to their already burdensome packs.

Yet every time she voiced these thoughts, Eliad shook his head. "At the right time, you will realize these words are not heavy but light."

She watched Eliad unwrap the book. As the oilskin fell away, the fire's growing flames glinted on the golden symbol engraved in its leather cover. The Old Script's emblem of freedom, Eliad had told her once.

Shara shuffled closer to Eliad and the book. Perhaps—if she was honest—closer to Tabeal. "We left the Grotto almost six weeks ago. Wouldn't our long journey have been the perfect time for this . . . *telling* of which you speak?" she asked.

Eliad looked at her with his usual gentleness. "We are on the edge of the Rif'twine, my love. The journey ahead is far more arduous than the one behind. It is for such a time that Tabeal has kept the book. In that dark forest"—his eyes roamed in the direction of the Rif'twine—"we will need its light. Tonight I will begin to read the words, and Tabeal will bring us understanding."

They set off as soon as there was enough daylight to see by. Eliad clutched his gnarled walking stick and led the way. Their time at the Guardian Grotto, and these last few weeks fleeing from it, had taken its toll on the old guide. His back seemed more hunched. His silver hair and beard were more matted, and his eyes—which had always held a youthful sparkle of mischief—had grown somber.

He was not the only one changed, Shara thought as she fell in place behind him. She was different too. No longer that fiery, dark-haired young woman who used to feel so deeply and speak her mind so freely, the one Nicho had fallen in love with. She had let the Dusk Dreamer's power into her life, and it had hollowed her out, stealing the best parts of her. Shara felt empty. Numb. Only regret and shame filled those deep places where once conviction and love had thrived.

Behind her Andreo spoke about the various plant specimens he had once gathered in the Rif'twine when he was a Brethren of Taus monk. His interest in creating healing potions and ointments had been against the Brethren's Code, which outlawed herbal alchemy along with all other Parashi practices. It had led to his Disgracing, where he was stripped of his monk's cowl, along with his name and position amongst his Brethren. He was forced to spend an exposed night on a plateau above the monastery. This was where the Gold Breast and Eliad had found him, rescuing him from the even worse fate still to come: the mind-altering powers of the Word Art Brothers.

Yet, it was clear from his uninterrupted account of the botanical wonders of the Rif'twine that his passion for healing plants was as strong as ever.

"Hush, my friend." Eliad silenced Andreo as they neared the road leading to Gwyndorr. How strange that their journey had taken them back to the very place they had escaped from months earlier. *Why did Tabeal not lead us to this path straight from Gwyndorr? Why take us all the way to the Guardian Grotto?* Shara had asked Eliad a while ago, thinking that if the Gold Breast had not led them to the Grotto, evil could never have breached it. *We had to go to the Grotto*, he had said simply. *Dark days lie ahead for them. The words of the book are their hope too.*

"Where does the path start?" Andreo squinted into the now-

bright morning light, staring at the forest beyond the road. He knew better than anyone how prolifically the Rif'twine grew and had voiced his doubts a few nights ago as they sat around the fire. Even if the path they sought had once existed, it was unlikely to still be there. Creepers and vines would have claimed it by now.

But Eliad had remained resolute. *It is no ordinary path.*

"It used to lie right at the edge of the Rif'twine." Eliad glanced around to check that the road was clear before he continued across it. "But it is possible that the forest has grown around it. We might have to go into the Dimzone to find it. Perhaps even into the Darkzone."

Like all Tirragylins, Shara feared the Rif'twine, the forest that crept ominously closer to Gwyndorr, devouring everything in its path. Only the Rifter Gangs had kept it at bay in her lifetime. Within the forest grew plants that could strangle you, poison you with their berries, or draw you with their alluring scent before releasing their toxic spores. As they drew closer, the forest seemed brooding and watchful. It reached out an invisible hand that prickled her skin with fear.

The air was cool and the light murky as they stepped into the Dimzone, where the plants had not yet completely taken over. A smell like rotting meat accosted Shara and made her gag. She lifted her arm to her nose and tried to breathe through the fabric.

"You'll get used to it," Andreo said cheerily, patting her on the back. "So what are we looking for, Eliad? A poison tree, you say?"

Eliad nodded. He was already pushing deeper, towards the Darkzone, where the thick plant life made movement almost impossible. Shara hurried to stay by his side.

"What does a poison tree look like?" she whispered.

"It has a light bark with a milky substance on it and dark, shiny leaves. Look." He pointed to a tree that towered above the other plants. "But don't touch it. The bark is very poisonous in the Rif'twine."

"Is this the tree we seek?"

"No. It was younger than this. Smaller." He continued to move farther into the forest. "Although, in *this* forest, it could have grown a great deal since then."

They pushed a little way into the Darkzone before they could go no farther and had to turn back. Eliad carefully worked his way across the forest, checking around every poison tree for the start of the path.

Shara fell back to where Andreo picked some leaves. “What if this path is overgrown like you said it would be, Andreo?” She glanced to where Eliad thrashed at some vines with his walking stick. “Or what if it starts too deep in the forest for us to reach it? Where will we go then? We can’t exactly walk back into Gwyndorr with Lord Lucian still on the hunt for me.”

Andreo looked at Eliad, his forehead creased in thought. “I’ve wondered this myself. But Eliad has no doubt that the path is here. And he has never yet been wrong.”

Shara and Andreo turned at the sound of the birdsong piercing through the ominous silence of the forest. Eliad’s head shot up before he looked over at them, the old laughter back in his eyes. He didn’t speak, merely pointed with his walking stick, and together they followed the sound of Tabeal’s song until they reached, at the edge of the Darkzone to the west of where they had started, the poison tree.

“This is the one,” Eliad said reverently, steeping his hands over his mouth as he stared at the tree.

It looked the same as the others but as Shara stepped around it, she saw that a path snaked through the forest from where the tree stood. It reminded Shara of a small tear on a long stretch of fabric, or a fine crack in a thick stone wall. The path seemed insubstantial with the trees towering above it and the undergrowth pushing against it, but some power seemed to hold the irrepressible forest at bay from that path.

“Well, I never,” Andreo replied, staring slack-jawed at that path. “How is that even possible?”

Eliad came around the tree to peer at the path. “The poison tree path. The way to freedom.”

*Freedom.* The word echoed through Shara, tried to take root. What did it even mean, this word? All her life, walls had hemmed her in. The very thing she thought would set her free had bound her even more tightly. In Marai’s love, and later in Nicho’s, she had

felt a stirring of something free and lovely, yet they were both lost to her now. She did not know this freedom Eliad spoke of with such sureness. But one thing she knew: she wanted it. She would walk this path no matter how dark it got, no matter how long it stretched on.

“What are we waiting for then?” She stepped onto the path and looked back at her companions with a grin that hinted of her former self. Eliad laughed and nodded his approval.

And the three of them started down the poison tree path. To freedom.