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The Great Becoming

Sara L. Blackwekk

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THE GREAT BECOMING

Sara L. Blackwell, B.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate
School of Lindenwood University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts—Writing

2005

ABSTRACT

Few questions stir as much curiosity and controversy as the question of how and why did man evolve. This culminating project strives to explore that issue creatively. Using a combination of religious overtones, myths and legends, and imagination, this project strives to be an original creation myth—a piece of fiction that answers how civilization, as we know it today, began. The story has not been written to replace commonly accepted religious beliefs. Rather, it has been written to complement them, to question them, and to explore the very beginnings of religion itself.

The introduction to this project focuses on how the idea for this story was conceived, as well as the many challenges that went into the creation of this novel. Much thought was given to the names of characters and places within the novel. No name lacks significance, offering the reader additional layers of meaning. For the reader's convenience, a glossary of terms has been included. In addition, a resource list, including all etymological sources, has been provided.

The story itself will introduce you to a foreign world, yet perhaps one that is also all too familiar. These people (called *creatures* in this work) live fairly solitary lives. They live amongst others, and they share the work that must be

done to survive. However, there is little, if any, value placed on relationships or connections between creatures. They exist in a civilization of the past, but the story retains a timeless quality, reminding the reader that the line between past and present often blurs. Although they exist without any modern conveniences, the creatures of the day do place a high value on work, and they strive to learn about—and sometimes shape—the lands around them. Some of the creatures possess true wisdom. Others, however, yearn for power, for fulfillment, for ultimate understanding. And in the course of this story, another yearning begins to awaken; the characters begin to realize the beauty of, and the need for, emotional bonds with others.

From the very start, this project was designed to explore the beginnings of life as we know it. But along the way, it became an exploration of life in general. In short, this project encourages one to look at life in new ways, and to continually be amazed by what it means to be human.

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COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro,
Chairperson and Advisor

Professor Ann Canale

Assistant Professor Beth Mead

for
Melvin & Ruth and Ray & Jo—
You continue to inspire



Acknowledgments

* To my parents, Gary and Linda—You read to me often when I was a child, and I believe that you gave me a precious gift—the love of words. With that gift, and with your unconditional love and support, you have helped me to walk this life path with confidence. Thank you for helping me to become the person I am today.

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Preface

To write this introduction is much like describing the relationship a fish has with water. For me, words have always been a critical and crucial part of my life. They are a necessity, and they breathe life into all that I do. They give meaning to my life and to the world around me. Some of my earliest memories involve one or both of my parents reading to me when I was young. They are avid readers, and I am thankful that they passed their love of words on to me. As a child, I made frequent trips to the library, only to emerge with an armful of new adventures, new friends, new cultures. I guess it is only natural that that love of reading quickly became a love of writing. For as long as I can remember, I have been jotting down story ideas, napkin poems, and character sketches. At heart, I am a writer. It is not my current profession, but it is how I define myself, and it is what makes me whole.

Throughout my education, I have been introduced to countless authors, schools of criticism, and literary movements. Pinpointing which of these has affected me most of all is difficult, if not impossible. I can't name who my literary influences are. There are too many. Every single thing I have read has changed me in some way, if even for a fleeting moment. For every author I can relate to, there have been two that I rebelled against. There were poems and stories and novels I loved, but my own work does not resemble these pieces in the least. So

the safest, and perhaps the most correct, response I can offer about who and what my influences have been is this: I have taken in everything. I have read and questioned the words and ideas on the pages. I have mixed and melted those words together until I was full of paradox. I have lines of poetry and images burned into me—visceral memories—that stay with me as I live each day of my life. There are books I retreat to when I need to secure a bit of solace. There are poems that I seek out when I feel the urge to rebel against the status quo or revel in the beauty of the mundane. I cannot point to a single author, literary movement, or book as the inspiration for my writing. As a writer, it simply is my duty, honor, and responsibility to take in as much as I can and to create as much as I am able.

I believe in the power of words, and of the ideas behind them. I believe that words have the ability to bruise and to heal. To offend and to rebuild bridges. To hurt, to burn, to betray, to disgust, yes, but also to empower, enlighten, strengthen, and captivate. Words are weapons or tools. A billboard can motivate. A song's lyrics can inspire or move me like nothing else. The words of a novel can cause me to view my entire life path in a brand new way. A delivered speech can stir change or anger, a eulogy can cause the grieving to laugh through pain. I find myself being inspired by people I encounter in the grocery store, by co-workers, by the traffic around me. In short, my inspiration comes not from writers alone, but from life in general.

My writing has always been an important part of my life. But this story in particular is one that has a great deal of meaning to me. It strays quite a lot from

my typical work. I tend to write in a kind of melancholy vein, with a focus on the negative aspects of what it means to be human. But this piece differs; in my opinion, it is a story of hope. It was definitely written with a healthy sense of exploration. Not just exploring myself and my writing strengths and weaknesses, but into all of the questions I have had rolling around my brain for as long as I can remember. With this story, I wanted to write something strong, yes. I yearned to write a dense piece, one filled with layers of meaning and history and religious overtones. But perhaps the biggest reason for my writing this piece was to delve into my own spiritual journey.

I was brought up in a church that my grandparents had literally helped to build. I attended services fairly regularly and was baptized. But even as a very young girl, I always struggled with the services. The stories seemed so unbelievable to me that it was quite easy to not believe in them. I resisted religion, consciously or not. It seemed almost oppressive to me—that in fully embracing religion, one was nearly abandoning a certain amount of free will. Not only did it seem like a cop out to me (e.g., ‘Well, that was God’s will’), but it also seemed like people often used religion to sell themselves and their own strengths short. It always frustrated me to hear an actor or a sports figure thank God in a speech for their success. I felt that that person put in all of the time and work necessary to be successful, and to thank God for everything seemed wrong to me. It was the work, the sweat, the dedication that led them to success, not just the blessings of a higher power.

Still, even as I listened to these people with a mixture of frustration and annoyance, I also secretly yearned to believe in something as strongly as they did. I have never connected with organized religion. Even looking back to religion in a historical context, it seems that it has always been a largely oppressive and fairly corrupt body. In addition to the recent Catholic sex abuse issues, there are things like reparations to consider—when buying your way into Heaven was considered an ideal way to overcome a life of sin. I have a hard time trusting religion, pure and simple. But it has always seemed to me that the very essence of religion—without the scandals or wars of faith—should be just that: *pure and simple*.

Throughout the years, I have always felt a visceral pull to a spirituality rooted in nature—I do have Native American blood, so I like to think that my spirit follows that ancestral path. My spirit feels much more beauty and power sitting in a forest than it ever has sitting in a church. The exceptions to this were encountered on my trip to Europe. I toured famous cathedrals and churches—Westminster Abbey, Köln Cathedral, St. Peter's. I was in awe of these structures. The sense of history was palpable, and the architecture was breathtaking. And in Köln, the tour I was with was blessed to have arrived at the cathedral just moments prior to a mid-day mass. As we were walking among the gigantic stone pillars and in the rays of colored light streaming through the stained-glass windows, the service began. I was struck to my very centre when the pipe organ began to fill the building with haunting, powerful, inspiring hymns. I wanted nothing more than to just sit on one of those historic pews and listen, but we were

forced to leave to keep on schedule. That trip took place when I was 16. Ten years later, I can still close my eyes and be transported to that cathedral. And still, I ask myself this: *Why* was I so moved by that experience? I was only able to hear that music for a minute or two, but those moments changed me. Was it because I felt God there? Was it because I felt a sense of community?

Looking back, I am convinced that the experience made such an impact on me because of the utter beauty surrounding me in those precious few moments. I was standing in a building that had been built hundreds of years ago. Kings and peasants had walked there. History was infused in the walls, in the air. The ceilings, the columns, the stained glass, the sculptures—all created a surreal and powerful sense of me being very small, very insignificant in the grand scheme of things. And when that organ began playing, I was transformed. Carried away by the sweet, sad strains of melody that vibrated the very walls around me. Those notes reached into me and moved me. Literally. I felt as if my body's chemistry had been altered by the experience, as if I had somehow been left more complete or more human as a result.

I realize now that the feelings I had surging throughout my body were the same ones I feel when I encounter something beautiful in nature. Yosemite National Park, for example, provided me with ample doses of soul-affirming experiences. Half Dome, Yosemite Falls, and all of the other massive geological structures again made me feel small, yet more complete for having stood in their shadows. There was a peace in the park—never mind the tourists or the shuttle

buses or the running children. At several points during the trip, I closed my eyes and ears to the distractions around me and truly focused my senses on the spiritual energy surrounding me. I felt as close to God as I ever had—the same way I had felt standing in the Köln Cathedral.

For years, I struggled with the belief that there was no God at all, breaking my mother's heart in the process. But over the years, I have come to revise that belief. That is due, in part, to the experiences detailed above. But sadder events have also shaped my faith. I was lucky enough to be with three of my four grandparents as they died. Each of those experiences was painful, yes. But there is also a beauty in witnessing a loved one's last moments. Especially moving was the death of my maternal grandfather, a quiet man named Ray. Grandpa's strength in life was evident. He had been in the Pacific during World War II, a mechanic. At one point during his tour of duty, he was smashed between two trucks. His injuries were substantial—his pelvis was pretty much shattered and his organs were badly damaged. My Grandma received word that her husband was not expected to return to the States alive. But Grandpa slowly recovered, even fighting like mad to get through a bad bout of Typhoid. When he was well enough to travel, he refused to let anyone contact his wife. He wanted his return to be a surprise. The story that my Grandma told was that she was in the kitchen working. The door opened, and there stood the man she thought that she had lost. She ran to him, and by all accounts, that meant clearing the kitchen table like a hurdle. Grandpa was not expected to live, much less be able to have any children.

But within just a few years, he had fathered four daughters.

Grandpa's entire life had been lived with this quiet, noble strength. He defied odds. A massive heart attack was supposed to kill him the year I was born. It was bad enough that it forced him into retirement, but he lived for twenty more years. He and Grandma often went camping and both remained active. In his later years, he was diagnosed as having brain tumors. But to the astonishment of everyone, the tumors disappeared on their own. The one thing he could not beat, however, was the series of strokes that led to dementia. Grandpa was never a man of many words, but now he was reluctant to speak; confusion left him frustrated and embarrassed. Words had become strangers.

Grandpa was admitted to the hospital on a Saturday with what looked like a severe stroke. Barely conscious, his last words were "I love you"—my mom cherishes the fact that she happened to be in the room. By the end of the day, Grandpa descended into coma. The doctors took him to surgery to stop the bleeding, but when they opened him up, they found that his brain was leaking blood like an engorged sponge. Death was now certain.

For a week, my family gathered at the hospital. We told stories and laughed together, we cried and grieved at the loss we knew was coming. I sat with Grandpa for hours that week—holding his hand, wiping away the gigantic beads of fever-induced sweat. I talked to him, and though he was silent, I felt that I was able to get to know the man better than I ever had before. Lying there, he was not just a husband. Not just a father or a grandpa. He was simply a man. And when

this man took his last shallow, rattling breath, we were all there to witness it. The room filled with devastating silence, then relief, and finally tears. And I can remember looking at Grandpa, at the man lying peacefully on the hospital bed in front of me, thinking, *There is more than this*. I could feel the emptiness of the body in front of me, and I knew without a doubt that his soul had left on a journey to someplace much sweeter. A science rule came into my thoughts just then—the one about how energy can never be created or destroyed, just transformed. And in that instant, I finally understood what that meant. And in that instant, I finally felt the power of faith.

Still, I struggle with religion. Although I want to believe in something, I'm not sure exactly what to believe in. Some religions would have you believe that every single word in the Bible is true. But in other parts of the world, where Christianity is not the main religion, the text of the Bible is not given a second thought. I have always been drawn to the creation myths and legends of other civilizations. I love reading about how Earth and Water came together to create life as we know it, or how the creator figure made the first humans out of different shades of clay, therefore creating the distinctions of race. Our culture might consider these primitive and baseless, but who are we to determine what others believe? If one believes that the Bible is true, then all of these wonderful stories are considered valueless. But it is impossible to believe all of the stories at once, because the stories contradict one another. I am someone who wants to be open to everything, but it seems that believing in everything is equated with believing in

nothing at all.

I took that frustration with religious paradox and created a story. My goal with the original story, and this altered version, was to create a possible starting point for civilization as we know it. There are religious parallels—with main characters named Edam and Aive, how could there not be? But never once has my goal been to offend or anger anyone of any faith. Instead, my goal throughout the process has been to draw on religious beliefs, stories, imagery, and history and marry them with a healthy dose of imagination. I want this story to be able to stand on its own, to be thought of as literature and not as some work whose sole purpose was religious commentary. The piece is a personal spiritual journey for me, absolutely, but it is also a huge test of my skills as a writer—a writer of fiction.

It is easy to describe how this story started: It came out of frustrated writer's block. I was working with an absolute blank canvas and was going out of mind searching for ideas. I was wandering around the house aimlessly, mumbling my stream-of-consciousness offerings. Nonsense sentence after nonsense sentence emerged. But then these words came popping out: *I was a child once*. I stepped back from myself. I was intrigued, but had no real concept of what it meant. Weren't we all children once? Was there a time when children did not exist? How did people develop then, and when did the first child arrive? Questions began ricocheting around in my brain—I had caught my interest; perhaps this fledgling of an idea could work. So I put fingertip to keyboard and began writing. I had

expected this story to have humor. The first draft was lighthearted and whimsical. Tongue-in-cheek, lively writing. But it did not work. So I toyed with the idea and tweaked it, until a story about the time before culture as we know it today existed. I was interested in writing such a story, but it seemed a truly daunting and frightening task. Could I pull it off? I honestly doubted it.

Over time, the story grew, taking on new meaning. I created a basic story for class, always aware that I was building only a bare-bones frame of a larger story. The characters I created for the original story were, arguably, flat. The concepts were somewhat fresh, yet altogether too familiar. Looking at that story, I see many sections that are weak in design and even weaker in execution. But the idea was there, the essence. When it came time to select a project for my cumulative piece, I immediately felt that this story was the one I wanted to tell. I wanted to rework it—I knew that there had to be more to it than what I had already written. I was eager to see how the story would turn out, if given the time and patience to see it through to the end.

I had expected it to be fairly easy. I knew the basic story, after all. I would only need to add sections here and there, flesh out characters, explain things I had only touched on in the original story. But in essence, I told myself, the story was done. I simply needed to slow down and tell it. Soon after I began writing, however, I discovered that this was going to be a much more difficult piece to create than the original story. I felt painted into a corner by the original story. In short, I was stuck—hung up on how to make the original story longer. But then it

hit me: This had to be a completely *new* story. I had to start from scratch. I knew the basic storyline and I had the characters, but I had to start from someplace that was completely and utterly fresh. Once I figured that out, it got a little bit easier. Still, there were challenges. I had already seen where the characters would go, but now I had to plop them down somewhere foreign—at the beginning of their stories instead of at the end of them. I had to get to know my characters intimately, and I had to immerse myself in this world of my own creation. And once I did that, I felt the original story slowly being pulled away from me, altered, transformed.

Like all good characters, Aive and Edam took my original intentions and ran with them. They began to tell me what steps to take. They began to flesh themselves out. I resisted at first, because, darn it, *I* was the one telling the story. I knew exactly what was going to happen. I was in control. But by fighting with them, I was only making things difficult on myself. I had to step back from my intentions—my plans that were so set in stone—and listen to the characters I had created. They were talking to me, telling me the story that *they* wanted me to tell.

This story now barely resembles my original story. I have been continually surprised by the things that were revealed to me, and am amazed by what can be accomplished once all the pieces are fitted together properly. My characters took me on an even grander adventure than I ever could have imagined possible. I may have been writing the words, but I certainly was not in control of the journey. And that, of course, is fitting.

Glossary

Arkhe—the home unity of Aive and Edam; *arkhe* is Greek for ‘beginning, origin, first place’

Ashtad—a unity in the south, known for violence; *ashtad* is Persian for ‘justice’

Becoming—the way in which creatures enter into the world

Ceasing to be—death

Cetus—a mountain range; *cetu* is Old Irish for ‘first’

Creatures—men and women

Elder—the oldest, and most powerful, creature in each unity

Hakuma—a fellow Marked One; *hakuma* is Arabic for ‘he was wise’

Helper—servant

Marking Clan—a group of creatures that travels to unknown lands for the purpose of obtaining such knowledge as the locations of rivers and other unities

Marked One—the creature on whom the journeys of the Marking Clan are recorded

Marking Stick—the tool that the elder uses to record the journeys on the Marked One

Qayin—the son that Aive delivers; *qayin* is Hebrew for ‘created one’

Second—the second in line to be elder

Semija—a helper in Arkhe; *semija* is Old Church Slavonic for ‘domestic servants’¹

Unity—a village or community



Illustration 1 Edam and the Marking Clan



Illustration 2 Map of Locations within The Great Becoming

The Great Becoming

PART I

In the Beginning

Aive sat back on her heels, raised her hand, and watched as the rich, black earth flowed through her fingers like water. She was surrounded by it daily; and it had become a part of her, engrained and majestic in its simplicity and beauty. When she had first arrived, she had been assigned to the gardens, and each day she awoke early, ready for the hard labor of subsistence. From first light to last, she turned the fertile soil, pulled, weeded, and planted. Aive took great pride in watching her seeds sprout...witnessing the tiny green shoots straining and striving to reach the warmth of the sunlight. She loved the feeling of picking the colorful, ripe fruits and vegetables, knowing that she was responsible for their creation. There were other gardens, of course. They surrounded the unity of Arkhe, a living moat. Each garden had been assigned a caretaker. That creature was solely responsible for his or her garden; they received the praise of success and were chastised for failure.

Aive brushed her calloused hands together, removing what dirt she could from them. In reality, she never really was able to free herself from it, nor did she want to. To her, the brown and green stains on her fingernails and flesh were constant reminders of her connection to the earth. Still, with the moon beginning

its ascent on this spring night, it was time for her to stop for the day. She often worked past moonrise, but tonight she needed to spend time preparing for her journey. Tomorrow—early, long before sunrise—she would begin on her trek to visit the Great Oracle. Warily, she stood up and stretched her back to relieve the tight, burning tension that had settled into her muscles. Like any duty, hers was not without sacrifice.

Lost in thoughts of her upcoming travels, and exhausted from her day, Aive failed to notice the commotion around her. Three others—the Arrival Council—rushed past her, back toward the garden that Aive had just left. There, in the center of the bean field, a creature was becoming.

Edam was supine in the dirt, surrounded by a circle of silent, somber creatures. He was chilled. In spite of the glowing fire, his nakedness left him exposed to the cool night air. A wise elder got up from the flames and stood over Edam with the fiery Marking Stick. With trembling hands, the elder raised the smoking tool towards the stars and began moving his lips in silent chant. The other creatures stood and joined him in reciting the Words of Marking. The mantra completed, the elder stiffly lowered himself to the waiting wool blanket on the ground. His breathing heavy from the exertion of the ceremony, he took a deep breath and then offered these words, "Tonight we again mark the flesh. Tonight we again record our history." With that, he held the tip of the Marking Stick into the fire once more, and then moved over Edam to begin his work.

Each time Edam found himself staring up at the staff, he wondered again about the wisdom of the then-elder all those years ago. Within moments of his becoming, the old creature had hobbled up to an overwhelmed Edam, dug his cane into the dirt for stability, and said, "You will be the Marked One." The old one grasped his walking stick, took a raspy, pneumatic breath, and shuffled away. Edam was left staring after the creature, wondering exactly what it was that had just been decided.

Now, as the smoking point of the Marking Stick sizzled against the sensitive skin of his forehead, Edam again remembered his sacred duty. Gritting his teeth and digging his fingernails into his palms until they began to bleed, Edam tried desperately to look like the revered creature they claimed he was. The elder at last wiped the blood from Edam's face and anointed him with a special salve to set the ink. The journey of the day had been recorded. Edam was helped to a sitting position, and the creatures softly chanted and rejoiced.

Each time Edam had been marked, the event had caused some degree of celebration. But this marking session was the most important of Edam's existence. It was his last. Overcome by the dignified ceremony taking place all around him, Edam looked down at his flesh. With arms outstretched, he saw the paths of rivers, the summits of mountains. Legs were covered by vast stretches of desert and forest. His torso and back, hands, feet, neck, even genitalia and buttocks reflected the terrain, unities, and landscapes that the Marking Clan had encountered. He was a living diagram of their travels, and tonight, the last

available piece of flesh had been dyed with the most recent journey—that of the trek to the Blue Valley.

With great relief, he eyed the Marking Stick. No longer did he view it with the pounding fist of fear, but with the respect that came from the dawning realization that his life's work was at last fulfilled. The very tip was a sharp sliver of diamond; it shimmered in the firelight. Edam could still see his blood dripping off of it. It mixed with the ink that dribbled out of the reservoir, creating a black-red puddle by the elder's foot. The old creature shifted as he stood, and the ink and blood were smudged and smeared together, dyeing each other and the earth below.

A sensation of warmth stirred in the region of the last marking. It was a soothing and familiar feeling, a pleasant side effect of the salve. The feeling grew more powerful and began to spread throughout Edam's entire body. Within moments, Edam was filled with a sense of calm, of peace, of contentment. Edam's head felt as if it was only loosely attached to the rest of his body, his muscles relaxed, and slumber threatened to overtake him. Knowing that it was useless to resist, Edam's eyes strayed to the fire, and were lulled to sleep by the teasing, liquid flames.

In the hours before dawn's arrival, Aive busied herself with final preparations for her journey. She had already gathered a thick woolen blanket, three water skins, dark rye bread, and some dried fish. Now she walked over to her shelves and scanned the contents. Spotting the light blue bottle she was after,

Aive gingerly picked up the vial and wrapped it in several layers of soft cloth, securing it with a leather strap. Carefully, she placed the small bundle on the top of her travel pack and pulled it closed. With growing anticipation, Aive donned her hooded cloak and hefted her pack. She opened the door of her small hut and found the unity still silent. In the distance, an owl called out in his rhythmic, soothing tones. Aive smiled at the comforting sound, closed her door, and stepped out into the darkness.

This was her first journey to see Morphea in years, and it was a journey not without its controversy. Morphea was quite ill now, and she only made public appearances at special times throughout the year: for the Vernal and Autumnal equinoxes and the Summer and Winter solstices. In the past, events like the harvest, the first snowfall of the year, and the thawing of the waters also brought the masses to the Oracle's temple. Whenever any nearby unity experienced a significant occurrence, creatures would flock to her altar in search of Morphea's sage advice. Her words had assisted many unities in making critical decisions. But now, with her frail health and advanced age, such treks were discouraged. Of course, her diminished audiences were also a result of her severely tarnished reputation.

Years ago, thousands of the faithful had made the journey to each of Morphea's seeings. There were other oracles throughout the Known Lands, but it was Morphea who many argued had the most significant and accurate prophesies. Creatures looked to her with the utmost respect and reverence. For decades, she had prophesied bountiful harvests, devastating droughts, and geographical

discoveries. Creatures looked to her for reliable, useful information about what the future held for their unities.

However, Morphea's reputation was tainted when she began having visions of things that never came to fruition. She was adamant that there would be a horrible event called *war*, in which creatures would fashion weapons out of iron and kill one another. The audience was appalled by this vision—the unities prided themselves on peace and solidarity, and felt it impossible to even imagine a time when they would turn on one another in a fit of senseless violence. But Morphea's bizarre visions did not stop there.

On the morning of the very next seeing, the gathering of the faithful looked up at her expectantly, waiting for her wisdom.. Morphea began by telling of a time when creatures would travel about in metallic pods instead of on their own feet. It was startling, and so foolish that many creatures in her audience that day simply laughed angrily in her face and turned away. Those who remained in attendance said that Morphea paused when she saw the creatures leave in a cloud of frustration and disbelief. But as easy as it would have been for her to recant her visions, she simply continued with her prophesies—she told of a time when creatures would harness and control a source of energy so powerful it would usher in an entire age of innovation; she told of seeing giant metallic hawks that would carry creatures to the clouds and, eventually, to the stars; and she told of horrific times when creatures were bought or sold, killed or tortured.

The creatures who had remained in her audience looked up at her with eyes that reflected the betrayal, confusion, and anger they now felt. Many of the

creatures had journeyed for moons or longer to hear of Morphea's visions about the success of the harvests. But not one word had been spoken about the crops. Or of the severity of the upcoming winter. Instead, they had been offered words—riddles—that meant nothing to them. They had made the long journey for naught, and they were livid.

Many of the creatures who had been left in her audience walked away in disgust. Others called out to Morphea, demanding that she give them a vision they could actually use. Morphea looked out at the waiting crowd with an expression of sadness and tried to explain: *"I have offered you everything that I have to give. I have shared all of my visions with you. There is nothing left to reveal."* The Oracle was visibly shaking, for she was at a loss. She, more than anyone, was shocked by what her visions revealed to her. But as odd as these prophecies seemed, she felt that they were somehow significant. Getting others to believe that, however, was an impossible feat. The anger of some of the creatures had been tempered with Morphea's heartfelt honesty and sincerity. But the anger and frustration of others would not be quieted. A single male creature mounted the platform of the altar and walked stealthily towards the frightened Oracle. Another creature climbed up. And another. They kept coming until the platform was full. These creatures who had lived their entire lives as solitary beings were now connected by a single phenomenon: rage. A seething, fluid mass moved together to surround the Oracle, who was standing stoically in the center of the mob. She was silent, serene. They enveloped Morphea with their wrath and did not end their

attack until the Great Oracle was so badly beaten that she had slipped wordlessly into the oblivion of unconsciousness.

Aive walked now along the worn trail to the outskirts of Arkhe's forests. It would take a half moon to reach Morphea, and that was only if the weather and fellow travelers cooperated. Every few moments, in spite of her resolve to be fearless on this trek, Aive glanced behind her, to see if she was being followed. Each time, she saw nothing except for the lush forests on both sides and the trail of dust she was leaving behind her.

Suddenly overcome by the growing, throbbing fear, Aive stopped in the middle of the dirt path. She dropped her bag in the dust and stared at it for a long, agonizing moment. Trembling, she reached out and pulled up the left sleeve of her cloak. The sight still startled her. The scar was about the length of an eagle feather, ragged and thick. The wound had not been treated for some time after the injury. When she had at last arrived home to Arkhe, the arm was swollen, bright red, and oozing. Aive was sick with fever, and she had stumbled to the healer's dwelling. Too ill to knock, she had crumpled on his doorstep, waiting for him to open the door. When the healer found her a short time later, he helped Aive inside and immediately gave her a fever tea. He had wanted to take the arm off altogether. But a desperate Aive had begged and bargained with him to find some other way—if he had taken the arm, there was no way that she would have been able to do the necessary work in the garden.

The healer heaved a knowing sigh that reflected his disgust, and began treating the gash with foul-smelling elixirs and herbs instead. Aive's fever broke, and the red, oozing wound eventually cooled and healed. But it was the wound inside that never seemed to do more than merely crust over. Each time Aive gazed at her arm, she was taken back to that day, that horrible experience. Setting her lean jaw and fixing her gaze ahead of her, a determined Aive picked up her pack and continued walking. It had already taken her too long to return to the temple. She refused to let fear prevent her from doing so now.

Edam awoke in his hut with the sunlight warming his face. Stretching, he yawned and sat up. Without thinking, his hand strayed to his forehead and scratched the irritated, raw skin. Wincing as he dug too deeply, he removed his hand and found blood smeared on his fingertips. Quickly, he stood and reached for the damp rag hanging on the side of the water basin and dabbed at the blood pooling in the fresh cuts. He needed to see the elder for more of the calming salve that helped the itch. Edam was used to the process, but the instinct to scratch was one he could not resist. He sighed—the elder would chastise him for his foolishness; he always did.

A knock at the wooden door of his hut shocked him out of his musings.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Semija, a young female creature, walked inside. She carried a tray with Edam's breakfast on it: a bowl of porridge, a small loaf of brown bread, and a few slices of salt pork. A pot of tea sat steaming on the tray's

corner. Semija set it on the table with little fanfare; she had been bringing Edam his meals, and anything else he required, ever since he became the Marked One. There was a time when Edam had tried daily to make conversation with the female creature. But she was acutely aware that Edam was her duty, nothing more. Their relationship was cordial and emotionless—as all of the relationships were throughout all of the unities. When she had become, Semija had been assigned to the dwellings, and to Edam's hut specifically. That was her work station, that was her purpose, and that was her life. Now, with a quick nod of her head, she collected his dirty clothing, the now-empty water basin, and the bloody rag from Edam's hands and left. She would bring them all back, refreshed and clean, by the midday meal.

To his chagrin, Edam was considered the most important member of the unity. For this reason, he was not allowed to perform many of the duties of everyday living. The elder had always feared for Edam's safety. It was no matter if Edam ceased to be; Edam would be skinned and his hide preserved. But the elder and others tried valiantly to prevent Edam from causing some injury to his flesh. Simple scrapes would heal, with little or no lasting damage. But a large cut or injury could render parts of the flesh map useless. Edam struggled with the paradox of his existence. His function within the unity was to make it a freer, more confident civilization. But being Marked meant that Edam was essentially an eagle living with clipped wings—admired by all for his beauty and strength, destined to forever yearn for the places he could not reach.

A small campfire spat random sparks into the night. Aive huddled the cloak around her shoulders and inched closer to the heat. It was indeed approaching summer, but the night air was far from warm. Above her, the stars stood out like flecks of diamond, and the moon hovered like a knowing companion. Owls and other nocturnal life moved about her. Their presence was comforting. It was somehow reassuring to know that she was not completely alone. Aive took a sip of her tea and nibbled on a wedge of bread. Her day had been long and sleep begged her to submit. Aive selected a few handfuls of wood from her pile of kindling and placed them strategically in the fire. Aive took a moment to warm herself in front of the heat before she readied herself for sleep. She retrieved the warm woolen blanket from her pack and settled herself beneath it, lying as close to the fire as she could safely get. Covers tucked up under her chin, Aive stared up at the night sky. Exhaustion threatened to overcome her, but the familiar twinges of nervousness tugged at her. Her journey had started, and she was on the way to Morphea's temple. As tired as Aive was, that knowledge alone was enough to plague her with restless sleep.

Edam stood before the elder's hut. From inside, he could hear hollow, sporadic fits of coughing. It was clear to all that the elder's health was failing. Those in charge of departing had quietly slipped into the forest to select a tree for the elder to have when he ceased to be. There were also worried rumblings here and there about his replacement, the current second. Of course, nothing was said very loudly, and certainly not within earshot of the elder himself. As the oldest

surviving creature of the unity, he had competently ushered his creatures through times of distress; the respect they showed him had been earned. Still, the elder had hinted that his final days were just ahead. In small, subtle ways, he was already detaching himself from the unity. When the Marking Clan had returned to Arkhe after the final marking, for example, the elder had quietly excused himself from the festivities and instead spent the entire day resting in his hut. But in spite of his ill health, the elder was still the one creature who had the power to change Edam's existence.

Edam approached the door of the elder's hut and raised his knuckles to knock. But the door opened before he made contact with the wood. Edam lowered his fist and looked at the elder expectantly. Once a creature of imposing and impressive strength, the elder stood in the doorway...a withering stalk. His hair was white and unkempt. His robes hung loosely on his shriveled frame, and his shaking muscles made the robes quiver. It was clear that he had not expected to find Edam at his door; he was carrying a bag of soiled clothing. Now, embarrassed, he tried to hide the parcel behind him, but dropped it altogether with the effort. Edam bent and picked the cloth up, but not before he caught the odor of urine. Filled with pity and disgust, Edam handed the elder's soiled clothing back to him, never quite able to meet the elder's eye while doing so.

Ashamed for coming to the elder for help, when it was quite clear that the elder was in a weakening condition, Edam turned to leave. But the elder put out his hand and rested it on Edam's shoulder. Wordlessly, the elder ushered Edam

inside and closed the door. The clothing was quickly set down in a corner, out of sight. He gestured for Edam to sit on one of the chairs and he took the other.

“You look troubled, Edam.” The elder held Edam’s gaze with his own.

“Not troubled, Elder. Just...uncertain.”

“Of?”

“My purpose here.” Edam looked down at his hands then, waiting for the elder’s reaction.

The elder sighed. “How many times do I have to remind you that your work for Arkhe is complete? You have fulfilled your assigned duty with honor and will and now is the time for you to rest.”

“But you don’t rest. And excuse me for saying so, Elder, but your health is failing you.”

“I am aware of that fact. But here is another fact for you: I am not the Marked One. You, Edam, are. I am an elder only because I am the oldest. I started out in the laundries, and my life could have ended there. Another could easily have attained my position instead. But your path was chosen. Your life is different.” The elder began coughing and Edam handed him the mug of tea that was on the table.

“I did nothing to prove myself when I became. I arrived. That was all. I stepped out and was greeted by the then-elder and was told of my destiny. But why? How did he know that I was the one meant to be marked?” Edam sat forward in his chair, silently pleading with the old creature to give him the information he so desperately wanted to know.

The elder stood up and turned from Edam, crossing his arms and looking out the sullied window.

“It was time’s decision, Edam. That is the only answer I can give you. The previous Marked One had ceased being several months prior to your becoming. The Marking Clan was eager to explore new areas. A creature from the kitchens came forward and asked the then-elder if he could become the new Marked One. The then-elder thought on it for days, and he finally came to a decision. He could be the new Marked One, but only if a suitable male creature of the proper size and shape did not become before the next new moon.” The elder looked at Edam. “That creature eagerly awaited his first marking. He was vowed to silence, but he had no doubt that he would be the next to be marked. Within a quarter moon of the elder’s deadline, there had been no becoming. More days passed. And then, only two days prior to the new moon, you became. The then-elder was overjoyed when he learned of your becoming. But the creature from the kitchens was not. He refused to join in the festivities of your first markings. Bitterness engulfed him like flames.”

Edam had never before heard this piece of Arkhe’s history and he looked at the elder with great curiosity. “Who was the creature?”

The elder did not speak for a long moment, and he avoided looking at Edam while he considered his response. “When I became elder, that secret was passed to me, and I vowed to keep it.”

“So why did you tell me?”

“Because that creature’s bitterness lingers. It is time that you were told of it.”

“I don’t know what I expected to hear. But what you’ve told me changes nothing, Elder. I wish it did.” Edam paused, searching for the proper words to explain his position. “I look out of my hut and see creatures of purpose all around me. Some are on the way to the kitchens. Some to the laundries. Others go and tend to the gardens or the sick. They know what purposes their lives have, what their role for Arkhe is. I, Elder, do not. I am marked, but I am marked completely.”

“You’ve done your duty, Edam. Have pride in that.”

“I do, but—is there not more that I can do to serve Arkhe? How am I to spend my days? There is so much work. I am strong and able. I am willing to be assigned to another work station...”

At this, the elder hurried over to Edam and grabbed Edam’s robes with both of his trembling hands. There was urgency, fear, and exasperation in his eyes.

“Now you listen to me, Edam. And you *hear* me this time. Your work is done. You must not—cannot—fill your head with these fantasies about being noble and working elsewhere. It is not done. Your position within this unity is sacred. That is the way that it must be. You are destined to be cared for. To be coddled. To be revered. You need only enjoy the services that others give you. But this constant talk about being unfulfilled—from you, a Marked One!—is a

pure and utter disgrace. You have been blessed, and you seem to have forgotten that.”

“No, Elder, I haven’t forgotten. But I am unhappy with the knowledge. I want something to occupy my time. To make my life have a purpose that means something to me. I’m sorry. I know I burden you with my words. But I need to give Arkhe more than just my flesh.”

The elder released Edam’s collar, pulled away from him, and sighed. Edam was relentless. Always, this same discussion. And, as always, the elder’s explanation was again insufficient. Perhaps it was time to simply give in. The elder no longer had the energy for debate. Even now, a familiar wheeze tickled his lungs. He knew that Edam’s eyes were following him as he walked over to his apothecary chest and selected a small brown jar from it.

“I suspect you need some more salve for your forehead. You have been scratching again. Don’t think that I didn’t notice when I first opened the door. Thank goodness that the rest of you has survived your fingers all these years.” He held out the jar, and Edam took it gratefully.

“Thank you, Elder. I will make use of it.” He paused. “I did not mean to offend. I have been honored to serve the unity as a Marked One. I am blessed, and I ask you for your forgiveness.” Edam looked down, overcome by shame. “I have been thoughtless. Cruel.”

The elder sighed and his voice softened. “No, Edam, not cruel. Questioning. There is a difference. You are not the type of creature who can live a life confined by tradition and duty. I understand the need to do more, to have

something to occupy your empty days.” He paused, considering. “Now. I have been told that Aive, keeper of the northern garden, has left. From the state of her hut, her disappearance appears temporary.”

“Where has she gone? She gave no word? Obtained no permission?”

“No permission. But I can guess as to her whereabouts.”

“Well, where is she?”

“If I am correct, you will know soon enough. And if I am wrong, there is no need to discuss it further. However, while she is away, her gardens will be left unattended. Perhaps you might have some interest in tending them until her return.” The statement was an arrow, piercing tradition. Both creatures allowed the magnitude of the words to hang in the air and then settle into silence. They had been spoken, but the situation called for restraint.

“Yes. I will be glad to tend the garden in her absence.” Edam captured his tongue with his teeth to keep from smiling.

“She has already planted. There will be little to do until the crops take root. But I am sure she would appreciate the help.” He paused. “Now, if you will excuse me, Edam, I’d like to rest.”

Edam stood, nodded to the elder, and walked toward the door that the elder was now holding open for him. He paused before the doorway, feeling as if he should offer some words to the old creature, but nothing seemed appropriate.

“Good day, Edam.” The words were tinged with the hollow sound of defeat, and they reverberated inside of Edam’s mind as the door slowly closed behind him.

Aive was halfway to the temple. Her journey had already been long and arduous, and a quarter moon of travel still stretched out in front of her. The weather had held—the spring storms had not yet hit, although deep gray rain clouds had been accumulating from the west throughout the day. Aive had decided to stop walking early; she had come upon a unity and decided to make good her supplies and get a decent night's rest before starting out again the next morning. And with rain threatening, she would much rather be inside than out.

The unity was not one that she had been to before. It looked much like her own, with the gardens surrounding the unity's inner workings: the rows of dwellings around the unity square, and then the laundries, kitchens, and shops scattered about. As far as she could tell, there seemed to be about fifty creatures living here—roughly double the size of her own unity.

With the light of afternoon dwindling, Aive made her way to the unity square. A few creatures were milling about near the kitchens, and from her location across the square Aive knew to stay back. It was a sight she had seen numerous times at home: the processional for a creature who had ceased to be. Now was no time to intrude on this ritual. There were six or seven creatures in the group, all of them surrounding the creature who was holding the deceased in his arms. The group was solemn as they moved across the square and into the forest that neighbored the unity on one side. She could see that one creature was holding the necessary rope. Aive moved a little to the left to get a better view. She felt a little bit guilty about observing this, but she was curious to see if other unities

disposed of creatures in the same way as her own. Without even noticing, Aive was inching herself closer to the group. She was still across the square, but was quickly closing the gap.

The group had stopped at the base of an old cypress. The branches on one side of the tree had been freshly cut; the illness or injury must have been sudden if they had not had time to prepare the tree. The creature holding the deceased set the body on the ground. It was nude, as was expected. Clothing interfered with the ritual. The hands were brought together at the front of the body and bound with a length of rope. The rope was then wound about the torso three times and secured beneath the arms. Two of the creatures grabbed the other end of the rope and threw it toward the branches. Once it caught, the group worked together to hoist the body up the tree. A creature walked the slack of rope around the trunk and secured it to keep the body from moving.

Task done, the group looked up to inspect their work. Certain that the rigging was secure, all but one of the creatures nodded at the body and walked away. The remaining creature sat down in a clearing near the body and focused his gaze on the tree. Aive knew that this creature had been assigned the watch—he was not allowed to leave the tree until an animal of the earth and a bird of the sky had feasted on the body. If no animals came to feed on the corpse, it was considered bad luck and the body would have to be lowered and burned instead. The rest of the group was back in the square now, and one by one the creatures parted ways, back to the duties of everyday. Aive was so interested in watching the group that she did not hear the footsteps behind her.

“You seem very interested in watching the ceasing-to-be ritual. Have you never seen one?”

Aive jumped and turned toward the voice behind her. There, in front of her, was a small, swaybacked male creature.

“I have seen them before. I apologize for intruding. It was rude of me.”

“You are not from here.” His tone was questioning, but polite. Aive had worried that this was one of the unities that she had heard about—the kind that did all they could to make travelers feel unwelcome. But with a little luck, this unity would be like Arkhe, where those passing through were treated well.

“No, I’m not. My unity is a quarter moon away, to the north.”

“You are far from home. You travel alone?” His eyes glanced in back of Aive, to see if another creature lurked in the growing shadows. When he was satisfied that Aive was indeed without traveling companions, his eyes again focused on the female creature before him. “You are alone.” He smiled.

“Yes.” Aive eyed the creature uneasily.

“Have you been to Ashtad before?”

“No, this is the first time that I have traveled this way.” That wasn’t entirely true, but for some reason she did not feel it wise to be completely honest.

“Where are you headed? I can assume that Ashtad is not your final destination.”

“Well, no...I’m about halfway there.” Aive did not want to reveal her true plans if she could at all help it. Memories from her last time at the temple had

begun to plague her thoughts almost constantly, and she wanted to retain the veil of secrecy as long as she was able.

“Again—where are you headed? Perhaps I can offer you the use of our Marked One to help you find a suitable path.”

So this is an elder, Aive deducted. No one else would have the power to offer the Marked One. Aive wondered if he could be trusted, but she instead erred on the side of caution. If she wanted to discuss Morphea later, she always could. But she knew that if she told him now, she might wind up regretting it.

“No, thank you. That won’t be necessary. I know my way. But if you could direct me to the travelers’ lodging, I would be most appreciative.”

The old creature looked at Aive with narrowed eyes. He had indeed picked up on her evasiveness, and now he wanted to know of her plans more than ever. But there was no reason to rush her. He could always revisit the topic after she got settled.

“I’ll take you there myself. This way.” He turned and began walking. Aive fell into step and followed him across the square.

Edam walked to the edge of the garden and stopped. Already creatures were accumulating to watch. He tried to ignore their presence, but he could feel the disapproving and questioning stares boring themselves into the back of his head. He could imagine what they all were thinking; he knew that it must have been a strange sight—seeing the Marked One holding tools and appearing as if he was preparing to work. Edam was excited about the opportunity before him—the

entire unity was aware of Aive's success in the garden, and it would be remarkable to see her efforts up close. Still, Aive's success also meant that the unity as a whole was very protective of her area. Although Edam was the most revered member of Arkhe, he did not know how to garden. He was sure that his fellow creatures believed that he would probably destroy all the crops. Edam sighed. Perhaps it would have been better if the elder had made some sort of formal announcement. But then Edam smiled. *Of course, knowing him, he probably figured that this would be one way to learn my lesson.*

Resisting the urge to turn around and look at the crowd behind him, Edam took a step forward, onto the grass. He braced himself for some response from the others, but there was no audible reply. He continued to walk, careful to avoid the neat markers and rows of seeds. In reality, he had no real concept of what he planned to do while Aive was away. Seeds were planted, they grew, and then the fruits were harvested: That was the extent of his gardening knowledge. So he had opted to take all of the available tools from the work hut that morning, just in case. He knew of Aive, and he certainly respected her work; he wasn't about to jeopardize her crops.

At the far side of the garden, Edam set his tools down in a cleared area. *Perhaps it would be wise for me to get acquainted with the garden first,* he thought. As he walked slowly up and down the planted rows, bending now and then to inspect the ground for shoots, he wondered again about Aive's whereabouts. She had become just after Edam had been marked for the first

time—in fact, Aive's arrival had been the first time he had seen a creature become.

Edam remembered coming back to the unity square for the after-marking festivities. Creatures were all around him, slapping him on the back and inspecting the marking down the center of his chest. Edam felt odd, being the center of a celebration he had yet to fully understand, and he had wanted desperately to go to his hut and lie down. The markings were still tender and oozing. His skin was inflamed and slightly swollen, and the ink looked surreal and bright in the afternoon sun. The salve, applied to help with the pain, had mostly dried and Edam kept wondering when more would be offered. He was looking around for the then-elder, to ask him for more salve, when he saw it out of the corner of his eye.

The others took no notice. They were too busy with their chattering to pay attention to something they had all seen countless times before. A few creatures noticed Edam's distraction and followed his gaze. And, of course, the Arrival Council was already headed in that direction. A small circle of air began to twist and bob. It shimmered iridescently, like the shell of abalone. Within moments, the tiny bubble had grown nearly as large as Edam himself. It appeared as if something within the bubble was straining to get out—the flexible skin was pushed and contorted. After a moment the colors on the bubble began to swirl madly. The membrane visibly thinned, turned black, and then popped into nothingness. Edam blinked in surprise at the sight of the new female creature in front of him. She stood naked, squinting in the light, hair damp and clinging to her

face and neck. A member of the Council approached her with a standard greeting and offered the new creature a robe. She expressed her appreciation and they led her away. Edam knew that she would be assigned a hut, and later, a work station.

Edam had not thought about that day in years. He had never had much contact with Aive, but she always was of special interest to him because she had been his first. The creatures all agreed: You never forgot your first becoming.

Their voices roused her out of slumber. It was well before morning, and Aive felt as if she had only just gotten to sleep. Annoyed at being awakened so early, Aive tried to block out the discussion with the edge of her blanket. But as the conversation increased in volume, it soon became clear that a return to sleep was going to be impossible. Aive sat up, trying to make out the words being shouted. There were many voices, and they were all eager to be heard at once. Aive got up and looked out the window. She was startled by the sight. Most—if not all—of the unity's creatures had gathered in the unity square. The elder she had spoken with earlier climbed, with effort, onto a podium and raised his arms. The creatures were calmed into a low, agitated rumble. Aive wanted to leave her room and go to the square, to hear the elder's words, but there was something about that crowd that frightened her. It reminded her too much of a different time, a different place. She stood to the side of the window, listening, straining to pick up the elder's words.

At first, his words were too soft for her to make out. But soon, the creature's voice rose with a fury that made his words unmistakable. *Ashtad will not be dishonored by a prophecy from some useless oracle!* The creatures surrounding the elder roared with appreciation, and Aive shivered violently with fright. Panic rose in her throat with the sudden realization that she had seen the elder before. *Why didn't I notice it earlier?* She shook with relief that he had not recognized her this afternoon. Aive was certain that if she stayed, her life could be in jeopardy. But now, hearing the elder's words in the square, she was acutely aware that her life would be in even more danger if she continued on her journey. Her fear urged Aive to reconsider her trek—part of her desperately wanted to go home to her own unity. To busy herself with her garden. To find peace and solitude in her hut. But resolve built inside of her, and she mentally batted away thoughts of weakness. Aive moved silently, hastily around her room, gathering up her belongings. If she traveled cautiously, perhaps she would make it to Morpheia's temple before they did.

Edam was inside his hut, washing. His bone-colored rag was grayish-brown now, dingy from the dirt of a day spent working the earth. Edam had grown accustomed to the sights and sounds of the garden. He enjoyed watching the sun rise over the trees in the morning, listening to the birds usher in the start of day, watching the dew sparkle on the grass in the growing light. He marveled how the earth beneath him could be cool to the touch, even when the air all around him was not. Enjoyed watching the path of the sun and feeling the warmth of it on his

skin. Edam was not used to labor, but he found it agreed with him. The push and pull of muscle, the rivulets of sweat on tanning skin. It felt good to contribute to the unity in this way. At one point during those first days in the garden, he had the thought that the path of the sun was so unlike his own. The sun traveled along the same path each day, predictable and dependable. Edam's travels were sporadic and irregular. And now, complete.

The sun had long ago set, and hunger raged within Edam like a trapped beast. His evening meal should have been delivered shortly after he finished in the garden, but he had been back in his hut for more than an hour. Annoyed, Edam donned a fresh robe and ran stained fingers through his still-wet hair. Just as he was about to reach for the door, an urgent knock sounded from the other side. Edam flung the door open, expecting to find a tray of food and a guilty looking Semija waiting for him. Instead, the elder's Second stood before him, eyes narrowing at Edam's disheveled appearance.

Edam was disappointed, and was frustrated further by this delay. Still, social graces were required. Although Edam was the most revered creature in the unity, the elder was by far the most respected. And his Second was to be treated equally as well. Edam took a deep breath. The creature standing before him was not well-liked; he had been kind years ago, but now that he was so close to ascension, he was quickly becoming known for his quiet, calculating lust for power. And, although Umak was not well-liked by most of the creatures, the relationship between Umak and Edam was particularly strained. Edam's attempts

at kindness had been refused. It was clear that Umak's visit was to discuss unity issues; it was not a social call.

"Umak. Welcome."

"May I have a word, Edam?" Without waiting for a reply, Umak brushed by Edam and settled himself in a chair.

Gritting his teeth, Edam closed the door and sat across from Umak, who was now slyly looking around Edam's hut with a look of disgust. Edam's hut was the largest in the unity, and it was decorated with colored silks, wooden masks, and other unusual items. On the mantle, for example, was a carved reed pipe; Edam cherished it and often carried it with him in certain formal ceremonies. As the Marked One, Edam was given the privilege of displaying items that had been obtained on the travels seared into his skin. Not even the elder was allowed to display the items of travel.

"What is it that I can do for you, Umak?"

Umak was direct. "You are aware of the elder's failing health." He continued on without waiting for a reply. "Of course you are. How could you not be?"

"I am aware."

"And you are also aware that I am his second."

Edam gritted his teeth again. "Yes."

"Well, Edam, you know that when the elder ceases to be, it is I who will take his place. And I..." Umak sat up a little straighter in his chair, and Edam felt his stomach twist a bit, hunger forgotten. "...will become the most important

member of the unity. After you, of course." A sickening, smug smile greeted Edam when he finally managed to look in Umak's direction.

"Yes, that is the way. "

Umak stood and walked to the window, where he stood looking out at the unity square, hands clasped behind him.

"Well, I think that perhaps you and I should speak of the future now. So that we are clear on how things will proceed after the elder ceases to be." He turned to face Edam. "I have been watching you, Edam. Carrying your tools to the garden every morning, putting them away every night. Tell me, Edam: Just how long do you plan to continue?"

"Continue?" Edam suddenly knew what this was about, but he was going to make Umak work for it. He was appalled that the second was already planning on how he was going to do things differently when he became elder. It was forbidden to discuss such things, and this conversation only served to lower Edam's opinion of Umak even further.

"Yes. Exactly how long do you plan to continue your *work*?" Umak's tone was condescending, cold. Edam felt his face flush with anger. "You don't honestly believe that I will allow you to continue such nonsense?"

Umak walked over to the table and thrust his hands out to rest on the corners closest to him. He bent until his eyes were even with Edam's. "Do you?"

Edam held Umak's stare for a long moment, and hated himself as he felt compelled at last to divert his gaze. He could not reply. As elder, Umak would be

leader, and as leader, he would have complete and utter control. Although privileged, Edam could do nothing that Umak did not first approve.

“You took advantage of the elder in his weakened state, Edam. You made him go against tradition. Do not expect me to be so weak.” Umak stood straight. “The moment that I become elder, I will forbid you from ever stepping foot in that garden again. When I lead, I will not allow such foolishness. You are the Marked One. That is your place, that is your duty. That is who you are. Don’t you dare think that you can ever be more than that.”

Umak walked to the door. Edam stood, and slowly turned toward Umak, who was now reaching for the doorknob.

“You will become elder. But you will not lead. To become a leader, you have to earn respect.” Edam stood, waiting for a vicious response.

Umak rested his hand on the doorknob and paused. He did not turn to face Edam, but instead offered a low, cruel laugh.

“That’s the beauty of being a second. I don’t have to earn anything. I just have to wait.”

Aive arrived at the temple. The pillars of white alabaster shone in the last moments of sunlight, and the majestic cypress trees cast wavering, swaying shadows on the smooth surfaces of stone. The grounds were nearly silent, only the wind and the birds insisted on calling out softly to the approaching darkness.

Aive stood before the white structure. She was at once relieved to have arrived, yet her relief was tempered with growing, pulsing dread. She was glad to

have finally made the journey back, to this place where she had witnessed so much. It was cathartic to once again stand small beside the structure—just knowing, just aware, that she had survived to return. But her sense of peace was overshadowed by fear of the unknown. Aive had remembered the temple once being a thriving social center. Even when Morphea was not preparing for prophecy, creatures gathered to trade, to share and learn news of the neighboring unities, or to simply wait for Morphea to appear.

There had always been an audience of the faithful—those who set up brightly hued traveling tents. Those who set up temporary structures for preparing food or tending to the sick. In short, there had always been life just outside the temple walls. But now, that was not the case. Aive had certainly heard that Morphea's audience had dwindled dramatically since The Bad Time, but she never could have imagined *this*. This silence—the hollow, almost painful silence surrounding the temple.

“She is inside.”

The voice startled Aive, who turned around and around, frantically trying to locate the haunting voice calling out to her. Her nerves were on edge and she was worried about the arrival of the irate group from Ashtad. She had thought that she had managed to outrun them, seeing as she was alone instead of with a group of at least twenty or thirty, maybe more. But perhaps she had underestimated rage's power of motivation.

A rustle to her right made Aive jump, and she purposely dropped her bag, ready to bolt if the situation warranted. The low-hanging limbs of the live oak

bent and shook, then parted. An old creature stood there, placid and peaceful. Aive felt an almost irresistible urge to bow to the slight creature before her, as if the female's small stature coyly hid a source of great and noble power. The female approached Aive carefully, for Aive still had said nothing and her face was ashen and drawn up in an expression of perplexed fascination.

“Did you hear me earlier? Morphea is inside.” The voice was gentle and smooth, like lake water before sunrise.

“Yes, I heard you.” The sound of her own voice shocked Aive—it was tight and shallow. It was the sound that terror makes when it lurks just beneath the flesh...waiting to be needed. Consciously, Aive forced herself to relax, to breathe, to take the sharp shards of fear out of her voice, out of her stance. The creature before her was kind—kindness itself seemed to flow from her and Aive felt herself grow calmer simply by being near. The creature was a stranger, yet she felt so familiar that Aive was surprised by how much she wanted to go to her, to be even closer.

“You look troubled. Why don't you come and sit down with me?” The old creature sat down on one of the stone benches and patted the seat next to her. A soothing, albeit sad, smile spread across her face.

“She is resting and I was gathering some roots and leaves to make a healing tea.” She pointed to a leather pouch, bulging with greenery. “Morphea is very ill. She has been having fevers. She is unable to eat. The tea helps her to rest.”

Aive felt her chest grow tight with sadness. So the rumors about Morphea's failing health were indeed true. But, in her heart, she had known all along that they were. That was why she made the journey now—because it was a journey that simply would not wait. She approached the bench and sat.

"It is kind of you to care for her." Aive looked at the creature beside her, and was touched by the bright eyes she saw looking back. The old female smiled again, a very small and somber smile.

"It is not kindness that brings me here. It is much more than that." Her voice was soft, barely audible.

The creature's words stirred Aive's curiosity, but she refrained from asking for clarification. Instead, she tried to push all of her thoughts out of her mind altogether. It would be lovely to escape worry for a moment or two. It felt good to rest her legs. For five days, she had traveled as quickly as she possibly could, not stopping for more than a few hours at any one time. She knew that the journey should have taken her seven full days, but she had been determined to get here much sooner. Her leg muscles tightened and trembled with fatigue and for the first time the adrenalin failed to propel her forward. The days of hurried travel with little sleep were catching up with her, and the old creature's comforting presence only added to her exhaustion. For the first time in days, moons even, Aive felt truly, inexplicably safe.

Still, even though she wanted nothing more than to sit, Aive knew that time was not going to allow that. The group from Ashtad was still on the way, and Morphea had to be warned. She drew in a deep breath and looked at the old

creature beside her, who was in turn focusing on the tree line with her own cobalt blue eyes. They narrowed at something that Aive could neither see nor hear, but the uneasy expression on the old creature's face sent a shiver down Aive's limbs. They were coming. She could feel it. The old creature turned to face Aive.

"Tell me what you know." The creature grasped Aive's hands and held them in her own. "Quickly. Please."

Aive glanced at the trees and then turned to face the creature across from her. "Someone is coming." She shook her head, frustrated by her own mistake. "Not one. Many. Many are coming. Coming here, to harm Morphea. From Ashtad." She looked up into the old creature's face and felt the burning, stinging throb of tears that refused to fall. "They are coming back."

The creature cradled Aive's jaw in her small, strong hands and stared her straight in the eye. "You know more. Now tell me." Her voice was urgent, insisting.

"I stopped there, five days ago. There was a storm coming and I wanted to stop for the night. I met an elder, a male creature with a twisted back. I was sleeping, but woke shortly after moonrise to see the whole unity gathered in the square. They were angry, shouting, and the elder stood up and...and I recognized him. I had seen him once before. Here. When Morphea was attacked." Aive had to stop, for the effort of verbalizing such a painful memory was overwhelming. She wanted more than anything to grow silent, but she knew that their lives depended on her speaking now. Depended once again on her courage. Aive's words came out in a frightened tumble. "I gathered my bag and cloak and I left

the travelers' lodging out the back door. I don't think anyone saw me leave, but I know that when they found me gone, they had to know I would come here. The elder had to know. I think he knew I was coming here..."

"You told him outright?" The creature's eyes clouded with concern.

"No, I avoided giving him an answer...but...maybe that made him even more suspicious." She paused. "Perhaps he remembered me."

The old creature nodded her head slightly, as if she, too, knew the truths that had so haunted Aive all these years. "It is possible. But that was long ago, Aive. It is more likely that he was blinded by his own anger and thought nothing of your departure." She stood, still holding Aive's hands, and began moving toward the temple. "We must go to Morphea. We must prepare for their return."

When Aive did not move, the old creature looked back at her, puzzled. "What it is, Aive? We must go now. Morphea needs us, now more than ever before."

But Aive could only look up at the creature, a look of bewilderment on her face. It was her exhaustion, her fear plaguing her now...but something else had dulled her understanding, making her feel a growing sense of unease, as if her reality had just been hit from behind and jolted out of place.

"How did you know my name?"

The old creature held Aive's gaze for a moment, then her eyes flashed to the left as a sound in the distance caught her attention. She sighed and placed her small, leathery hands over her eyes momentarily. The question appeared to have

aged her. For the first time, Aive noticed deep lines at the corners of her eyes, and gray hollows beneath them.

“Aive, there is no time now to explain. I will explain, when the time is right. But now, I need for you to trust me. I need for you to help me. Please.” Her eyes were honest, and they were pleading for Aive’s understanding.

Aive stood and nodded solemnly to the creature in front of her. She knew that, with trouble approaching, they needed each other to get through what was to come. But she also knew that the words the old creature spoke were genuine. She walked forward, and the old female grasped Aive’s forearm for support as they walked through the alabaster pillars and into the temple. Aive walked into the receiving chamber of the oracle’s temple, which was divided into three main sections. The receiving chamber was the largest area, and it was what Aive and the old creature had entered into as soon as they had passed through the temple doors. It was a room with vivid tapestries hanging on the stone walls; high ceilings with torches and candles fastened about; and a polished black alabaster floor. There were a few stone benches and several small wooden tables; this room was used to host the masses when Morphea was preparing for a seeing. In the past, only the very earliest to arrive would be able to enter the chamber, while the remaining members of the audience were left to find a spot outside the temple. Now, the room was noticeably empty, full only of echoes.

The old creature stood patiently as Aive looked around the room in awe. She had never been inside the temple, and the sheer size of this chamber seemed to heighten her senses. She felt small, standing among the shadows that had been

cast by the flickering lights above her. But the old creature knew that the current circumstances would not allow Aive the time to explore the chamber, and she gently, insistently urged Aive forward so that they were standing before a great double doorway. The doors were massive, towering over Aive's head by several feet. They were wooden, but in addition to being intricately, beautifully carved, they were also decorated with a variety of inlays—gold, silver, shell, and stone had been placed on the doors, creating a wondrous mosaic, a work of art meant to resemble this very temple and the forests surrounding it. Aive stared at the gleaming, golden birds; at the miniature white alabaster columns; at the shining, silver shape of Morphea, arms outstretched. The craftsmanship was remarkable. Aive yearned for the chance to study it further, but all too soon the doors opened, revealing the next chamber of the temple.

Aive and the old creature walked through the doorway, entering into the gathering chamber. Whereas the receiving chamber was open to the public, this section was restricted for dignitaries—elders, Marked Ones, and others of high esteem. The room was much smaller than the receiving chamber, but was even more impressive. The walls were constructed of smooth stone panels, the floor was covered with colorful woven rugs, and a large cypress table dominated the center of the room. In one corner, a fountain trickled water into a standing, glass-calm pool. The air seemed dense somehow, weighted, as if the importance of the conversations held here in the past lingered still.

A small door on the far side of the room caught Aive's attention. The old creature walked to it, and motioned for Aive to follow. "This door leads to

Morphea's private chamber. You should feel honored, Aive. You are one of very few who has ever been allowed to enter."

"But why am I allowed to go in?" Aive felt a twinge of guilt about being allowed entry, as if she was not worthy to stand inside the third and final chamber.

"Your actions the last time you were at the temple proved the strength of your character. Come." The old creature turned the doorknob and pushed the door open.

The room was quite dark, nearly black. A single candle flickered to the right of the door, and it cast heavy, distorted shadows around the room. Aive's eyes had to adjust to the darkness. She had been expecting an ornate room, even more lovely than the other two chambers, but the room surrounding them now truly surprised her. Beneath her, a pale wooden floor, dented and scratched from years of use. The walls were stone, and covered by soft, faded fabric panels designed to take away the chill. A large fireplace took up most of one wall; on this day, the coals glowed deep orange, but the flames had died out. A thick woven rug decorated the hearth, and a gray cat was napping on the wooden mantle. It was impossible for Aive to believe that this was the room that had long since served as Morphea's private chamber.

Aive's new companion walked over to the fireplace and stirred the glowing ashes, adding another seasoned log to the fire. She added a few dry pieces of kindling, and the flames stirred, illuminating the room in glowing orange hues. With the increase in light, it became easier for Aive to see the quiet

beauty of the room, as well as the four-poster bed tucked away in a little alcove. Aive became aware that she was holding her breath, anxiously awaiting some sign of Morphea—the reason for her journey here, so far away from her home. But now, she exhaled, for she saw the thick quilt on the bed rise and fall with congested, raspy breath. Strands of long, silver-white hair fanned out on the pillow. Morphea was here. Aive had known that this room would be where they would encounter the ailing oracle, but to see her in person, after all of the years of wondering about her well being, was overwhelming. The old creature came up behind Aive, and Aive could make out a soft, worried sigh. Aive turned to face the creature.

“Is she worse?” She kept her voice low, to avoid rousing Morphea from her slumber. Aive glanced again at the bed.

“She is still asleep. That is what worries me the most. She now rarely rouses.” She paused, as if reluctant to continue. “But, yes, her breathing is worse. Why don’t you go and sit with her awhile, and I will make some of my healing tea?”

Without waiting for a response, the old creature walked back to the fire and began heaping her roots and leaves into a cast iron kettle, adding water from an earthen jug. She added a handful of something Aive could not make out, then stirred the concoction with a long wooden spoon. Aive took a breath and turned her attention from the fire to the bed in front of her. She noticed that her legs were quivering slightly, and she had to force herself to move forward. She walked to the head of the bed, eyes straying slowly over the varying textures and colors of

the quilt; the thin, pale wrist that had slipped out from under the covers; and to the clouded white eyes that now stared up at her. Aive jumped with the realization that Morphea was awake, and she turned toward the creature now bent over the kettle at the fireplace. She wanted to call out, to tell the old female that Morphea was conscious, but she was startled into silence by the fact that she did not yet know the old creature's name. She tried again to make words, but her voice sounded powerless and hollow even to her own ears.

"She is..." But just as she was about to finish her weak attempt at calling out, she felt long, cold fingers encircle her wrist. Aive shivered at the unexpected sensation, and looked down at Morphea. The oracle's eyes were fixed and focused on Aive's face, and her scarred mouth began to contort with the effort of speech.

"Sit." The voice was raspy, thin. But the tone was urgent. Aive perched on the bed, holding Morphea's hand..

"Would you like some water?" Aive began to reach for a mug on the bedside table, but Morphea held tight her grasp. She tried again to speak, but this time the words were but a soft shadow of a whisper. Morphea's eyes were big and pleading, begging Aive for understanding. Aive bent down towards Morphea, until the oracle's breath tickled against her earlobe.

"There will be..." She coughed an exhausted, feeble cough. "...there will be a child. It must be protected. You must be strong. You must survive." Drained, Morphea fell back onto her pillow, shallowly gasping for breath.

Aive sat back, staring at the withered frame before her. Morphea's words had made her tremble...not for the words themselves, but for the insistent way in

which they had been spoken. Aive had no idea what Morphea was saying about ‘a child’—it certainly sounded like something sinister, yet it was a word she had never heard before; she wondered if perhaps it had been merely an utterance formed somewhere in the depths of fever. But she was deeply, uncomfortably touched by the rest of Morphea’s words...if the oracle had retained any of her powers of prophecy, it seemed as if she was telling Aive that her challenges would simply continue, if not become even more difficult for her to bear.

The old creature came to the bedside just then, holding a steaming mug of tea. Aive moved off of the bed, and the old one sat, settled herself, and helped Morphea raise her head to the drink. Aive didn’t know what lurked for them outside of the temple walls, but before she could make mention about forming some kind of plan of action, Morphea swatted away the tea and spoke.

“You both must go from here. They come for me. Leave this place.” Her voice had been strengthened a bit by the soothing heat of the tea, and her words were delivered just as intensely as before.

Aive looked at the old creature. “She knows? How does she know?”

“She knows many things that you would not expect her to. She has had a vision; there is wisdom in her words.” It was clear by the somber tone of her voice that the old creature did not want to leave Morphea, but had enough respect for her prophecies to at least consider it.

“You don’t know what I heard in the unity square that night. That elder...those creatures...they had just learned about the seeing she had on Solstice. Something about...” Before she could finish, the old creature calmly

finished Aive's statement as she continued to offer Morphea more of the healing tea.

"...the end of their unity. She had a vision that Ashtad would turn to ash. Yes, I can understand why that would make someone angry."

Aive found herself getting frustrated. "How can you be so calm about this? And how did you know what I was going to say?" She paused. "Who *are* you?" Aive wanted desperately to understand the situation, but she felt as if she was parched and water was always just out of reach. "You seemed so troubled about them coming when we were outside on the bench, but now you seem...well, now you don't seem as troubled." Aive's fear and confusion manifested themselves as a helpless, impatient shrug.

"I'm not." She looked at Aive with gentle eyes. "There is comfort in knowledge, Aive. Morphea has seen. She is at peace with it. So I must be."

"She is very ill—we can't leave her behind. They want to kill her, and if we leave, they will do it. I came here to..." She stopped, trying to verbalize her next thoughts very carefully. "...I came here to try and understand."

Aive looked at Morphea's face, at the scars that twisted her mouth, her cheeks. She knew that there must be others, ones that were now covered by night robe and quilt. Instantly, she was transported back to the incident that continued to haunt her thoughts. In her mind, she could still feel the pulsing anger of Morphea's audience around her, and her own white-hot fear as creatures began scurrying up the wall and surrounding the oracle. For some reason she couldn't explain—perhaps it had been nothing more than simple curiosity—Aive had

followed them. She stood in the crowd, the smell of sweat hanging thick in the air. She shivered now at the memory of them moving closer and closer still to the stoic Morphea, at the memory of them lunging out at her, yelling and clawing, swarming like vicious beasts. Aive had stood unmoving, appalled and horrified at the scene before her. She saw blood flowing on the platform, she heard the crack of bone. "*NO! STOP!*" Her screams had gone unnoticed over the madness, over the sickening shouts and thunder of pounding, devastating rage. She acted, tunneling her way through the crowd with one simple goal: to protect. Aive felt hard, hitting fists and stones on her face, on her back, and she felt the skin on her arm slice open...ripped apart as her flesh fell prey to an obsidian dagger. The pain was enough to make Aive swoon, but she fought her way to Morphea and dropped to her knees, covering the now-unconscious oracle. The crowd eventually grew bored of hitting unmoving, unresisting targets, and dispersed, as quickly and fluidly as they had gathered. Aive, too, then felt the world around her slip away and she was lost into nothingness.

Aive's eyes shone bright, and her voice wavered. She spoke as if the two creatures in front of her knew the exact moments she had just been reliving. And they did. "I woke up...after. Days after. I was in a tent, away from the temple. My arm was bandaged. My ribs were bound. I was covered by a blanket. I had no idea where I was, or how I had gotten there. I had no idea if Morphea had lived or ceased being. For days I slept, waking for only minutes a day, but always—always I found fresh food and drink. When I was able to stand, I left, and I

eventually made my way back to Arkhe.” Aive felt that her cheeks were wet. “I never knew what happened. I only came here to understand what happened.”

Morphea again put her hand out and reached for Aive’s arm. Her voice still lacked much power, but there was an obvious, gentle strength as she spoke. “You saved me.” Morphea smiled weakly at Aive. “And now it is I who must save you. You and Orda must leave me. It is the way it must be. They will come and they will do as they wish. But I am old. I am ready to cease being.” She stopped to cough, deep and hollow. When she had finished, she wiped a thin smear of blood from her mouth and continued, again focusing her gaze on Aive. “You have brought the blue vial?”

Aive was startled. She had brought it, a vial that she had found beside her in the tent. A vial that she had never opened. For some reason, she had felt compelled to bring it here with her. “I have it, yes. Shall I bring it to you?” She took a few steps toward the center of the room, toward her traveling bag.

“No, Aive. Hear me. Keep that vial with you. When it is time for you to use it, you will know. Until then, keep it with you. Keep it safe. And remember all I have said to you.” She held Aive’s gaze, then Morphea turned to face the old creature, who was still sitting beside her on the bed. “Orda, you must leave me. And it must be soon.” Orda nodded slowly, sadly. “You are my other, and you must continue.” Morphea’s voice trembled now, and Aive felt her own throat tighten in response.

Orda leaned over Morphea and caressed her hair back away from her eyes. "You are my other, and together we will always be." She rested her lips on Morphea's lips for a single, brief moment, then reluctantly pulled away.

Aive heard Orda muffle a sob as she stood, clutching Morphea's hand as she did so. Aive reached out and rested her hand on Orda's back. Orda squeezed Morphea's hand tightly, holding it and closing her eyes as if she wanted to burn the moment into her memory. Then she lowered Morphea's hand to the bed and let go of it forever. The two exchanged one last sorrowful gaze.

"Go, Orda. You must get to safety." Morphea's voice was breaking now. "Continue."

Orda nodded, closed her eyes once more, and turned to Aive. She wordlessly grabbed for Aive's hand and pulled her away from the bed. Not stopping, Aive and Orda picked up their belongings, walked out the chamber door, and closed it behind them.

It was late, yet Edam was still far from sleep. Instead, he was up, pacing the floor of his hut. He kept replaying his conversation with Umak over and over, and had been filled with wave after wave of dread as a result. The elder was very ill, and earlier in the day, Edam had noticed a group going into the forest to finish preparing the chosen tree. There were four creatures, and between them they had carried two long-handled wood saws, a bucket of fresh black tar, and various poles, mallets, and brushes. Edam watched them move across the unity square, not making eye contact with anyone else, not speaking. They were focused on the

task before them. As Edam worked in the garden, he had heard the faint sounds of limbs falling from the selected tree, and had seen the thin plumes of acrid smoke as the severed stumps had been burned and shaped, burned and shaped.

Edam had once witnessed the tree preparations, and he remembered watching intently as Lur, a creature who had long ago ceased being, began his work. First, he had sawed the branches from one side of the tree, as close as he could to the trunk. Then he had honed the stumps, making them rounded and smooth. After he had at last created a shape he was satisfied with, Lur had swabbed each stump with fresh, black tar. Soon the tree was covered on one side with black splotches. Lur wiped his hands on a linseed rag to remove the stray pieces of tar, and looked at Edam. "The work is finished. The tree is ready." Then Lur gathered his tools, and walked back to the unity. Edam had lingered for a few moments longer, staring up at the tree. One side of the evergreen was full and lush, dense with green needles. But the other side had been cleared to the trunk, with only the small, rounded stumps protruding outward. When he at last turned from the tree, Edam had hurried to catch up with Lur, to ask him why the branches had been cleared in such a way. Lur had only shaken his head from side to side, then he told Edam that it was not something to be discussed.

Now I know the answer to my own question, Edam thought now, still pacing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of movement outside in the square. Curious, Edam went to the window and looked out. The moon was nearly full, and offered enough light to see clearly. There was a flurry of activity around the elder's hut. The elder's helper emerged from the doorway momentarily and

was handed a big tray with various bottles and vials piled high on it. Then she again went into the elder's hut and closed the door behind her with her boot. A moment later, the unity healer followed her inside, carrying a large leather satchel. There were creatures milling about outside of the hut, and Edam could see more coming to join. Edam felt his muscles begin to tense. He stepped back from the window, then grabbed his overrobe and walked out into the square.

A few creatures noticed that Edam had emerged from his hut, and they watched as he approached and joined them. Nearly every creature from the unity was there, in front of the elder's dwelling. There was no conversation, and all eyes were focused on the elder's door. The moon was high, and although it was spring, the air held a bit of a chill. Edam pulled his robes closer, tighter around himself. Through the window and the light linen curtain behind it, Edam could make out the flickering light of several candles; movements from inside the hut cast long shadows onto the draping fabric. A low murmur of voices made its way outside. The words were not discernable, but the tone was clear. A few moments later, the door opened, and the elder's helper appeared. She wordlessly scanned the creatures before her, until her eyes finally settled on Edam's face. With a quick nod, she said, "Edam, come, he asks for you."

The creatures turned to watch Edam as he stepped through the doorway behind the helper and shut the door at the helper's urging. She led Edam into the hut, and then to the elder's bed. The elder was lying there, pale and struggling for breath. The healer was standing over him, applying a thick herbal paste to his bare chest to help him breathe. The helper noticed that the elder began to shiver, and

she gently placed another blanket over his legs. The elder's eyes were open now, but Edam wondered if they were actually seeing. They appeared glassy, and they were fixed on some random spot on the wooden beams of the ceiling. Edam looked to the healer and the helper, his own eyes questioning what actions, if any, he should take next. The helper was preoccupied and did not catch Edam's glance. But the healer looked up from applying the thick green salve.

"He asked for you a moment ago. Why don't you sit next to him and let him know you are here?" The healer's voice was soft and gentle, and his caring demeanor was evident both in his voice and in the soothing strokes of his fingertips across the elder's chest.

Edam looked quickly around and saw a chair in the corner. He reached for it and set it next to the bed, opposite the healer. He reached for the elder's cool hand and held it between his own.

"Elder? I have come to you." Edam kept his voice low, so as not to startle the old creature in front of him. Edam watched the elder's eyes for a sign of recognition, but saw none. Edam glanced back up at the healer, who motioned to Edam to keep speaking.

"Elder? Can you hear me? I am here, beside you."

The elder's wet eyes slowly blinked, and then the elder turned his head slightly to one side. His eyes were now fixed in Edam's direction, but Edam had the distinct feeling that the elder's sight was failing him. Nevertheless, he smiled at the elder just in case.

“Edam.” The voice was thick and raspy, and a hollow rattle rumbled deep in the elder’s chest.

“I am here, Elder.” Edam squeezed the old creature’s hands gently,

“You have made me proud Edam.”

Edam was touched. He had not heard these words before, but he felt the words now as if they were somehow being marked on him, just as the maps had been. “Thank you, Elder. I have tried my best to make you proud.”

“I will be gone before dawn. The second will ascend.” The elder coughed then, and the healer gave him a spoonful of a brown elixir. The elder rested a moment, then continued. “You must be cautious, Edam. There will be trouble for you.”

“Yes, Elder. I am aware.”

“For your own safety, you must obey him. You must not ask of him things that he cannot do.”

Edam felt a hard thickness in his throat. Guilt swept through him, hot and pulsing. “Yes, Elder. I will try to...”

“Not try, Edam. You must obey. You must be proud of your status. You must not always want more than you are entitled to have.”

Edam felt anger rise in him, mixing with the guilt and twisting into a knot in the middle of his torso. “Why do you tell me this?”

“I was foolish, Edam, when I indulged you. I went against tradition, and you are the one who will suffer for that. For your own good, you must fulfill your

role as the Marked One. Nothing more.” The elder’s voice was insistent and pressing.

Edam felt as if his insides were emptying now, and the hollow space was quickly being filled with hot anger. “What of my work looking after the garden until Aive’s return?”

“Another garden keeper will take her place. You must not return there. You will face the second’s wrath if you return there.”

“Has Umak spoken with you? Has he made you tell me these things before you cease being?” Edam did not mask the anger in his voice, and he noticed that the elder flinched in response and pulled his hand away.

“Do not be angry with me, Edam. The second came to me, yes. He is not pleased with either of us. He is eager for me to be gone. But I am telling you this for your own happiness, not for his. Not for mine. Edam, I want for you to live a contented life.”

“Contented.” Edam spat the word out with disgust, stood, and turned away from the bed. The healer cleared his throat and the helper gathered some soiled linens and took them to the far side of the hut. Edam had forgotten that he was not alone with the elder, and he felt shame for the anger they had heard in his voice. Still, the elder’s words had been hard to hear, and Edam’s anger lingered. “You know better than anyone, Elder: My life as a Marked One is not enough for me. No matter how hard I want it to be. I need more than that. To be content I need more than that.”

When there was no response, Edam turned back to face the bed. The elder was still looking in Edam's general direction, but the eyes were lifeless. The healer gently reached over and pulled his hand over the elder's face, closing the eyes for good. Edam moved towards the bed and sat again. He reached for the elder's hand and he held it close to his chest.

"Elder?" All anger was gone now, replaced by something that Edam could not name. It was throbbing and Edam felt his heartbeat drumming inside of his chest. He looked up at the healer and searched the face, desperately seeking out hope. The healer only shrugged a bit and shook his head.

"He has ceased. He was very ill. It is better that he no longer suffers." He gathered his bottles and vials and placed them into his satchel. "I will tell the others. And I will summon the second." His words were decidedly cold, and Edam suspected that the second had not won the favor of the healer either.

"May I stay?" Edam still clung to the limp hand. "For a while?" Edam himself was surprised by the pleading tone in his voice. He could not explain it, but he was not ready to leave the elder's side.

"For a bit. But the second will be coming soon to inspect the body. Then we must prepare the body and perform the ritual."

"In the dark?" Edam had never seen the ceremony at night before, and the thought made him uneasy.

"An elder's ceremony must be within three hours of ceasing. That is the way, Edam. You may stay until the second arrives, but no longer." Before he left, the healer gently patted the elder's free hand. Then Edam followed him with his

eyes as he left the hut. The door closed behind him, and Edam closed his eyes when he heard the collective gasp as the creatures outside learned of the elder's ceasing.

The helper went out then with a basin, and Edam assumed it was to retrieve fresh water so that the body could be washed. When she was gone, Edam looked down at the elder. The candles were still lit, and shadows danced happily across his pale skin. Edam felt as if there should be words, some offering that he could make to the elder to. There had to be something that would make up for the anger that had been in his voice with the last words they had exchanged. But Edam did not know what words to speak, and he felt uneasy saying anything at all to someone who could no longer hear. So Edam simply sat there, still holding the elder's hand, hoping that was enough.

Within moments, the creatures outside began to clap—a slow, methodical rhythm. Edam cringed; Umak was arriving, and he was being welcomed in the customary fashion. Later, tomorrow, there would be the ascension ceremony. The second would be officially named as the elder of the unity. The elder's hut would be cleaned and Umak would take it over as his own. He would be given the elder robes and pipe in a gesture of tradition, and these token items would be used for future ceremonies. A new second would be named, and Edam wondered for a moment who it would be. It was not long before he remembered: The healer was next in line. After Umak, he was the oldest creature in the unity.

After a long moment of clapping, there was silence, and then a rustle at the dwelling door. Edam released the elder's hand and stood. The door opened, and

the healer entered. Then the healer stood to the side of the door and opened it wide. The second made his entrance, and nodded coolly to Edam. Umak gazed for a moment at the bed, then approached, coming to stand on the opposite side of the bed as Edam. Barely taking notice of the body before him, Umak instead focused his attention on Edam, who in turn was meeting the second's gaze with as little emotion as possible. Edam was resigned now to the fact that his life was about to become much less his own, and there was nothing to be done to change it.

"Edam, you were here with him, I understand." Umak's voice was soft, and Edam felt a chill run through him. It was a tone of voice that he did not trust.

"Yes. I was here."

"I hear that he asked for you by name."

"I was told that he did, yes." Edam felt as if he had to defend the elder now, and it was an uncomfortable position to be in.

"He spoke to you." There was no question in Umak's voice, and Edam knew that the healer must have already been instructed to tell of the events surrounding the elder's ceasing.

"He did speak, yes. We spoke to one another."

"And what did he have to say, in his last moment of power?" The tone was mocking now, a dare thrust at Edam.

Edam took a long breath, then exhaled. As angry as he had been at the elder only moments ago, he yearned now for his wisdom. But Edam had only the words that had been given to him as a warning. He must proceed with caution with Umak. Even the elder had know he was not a creature to be trusted.

“His words were unclear to me Umak. They sounded like little more than nonsense.” Somehow, Edam managed to hold Umak’s gaze, until the second was forced to look away. When he did, Edam caught the healer’s eye. Edam had been bold to say such a thing to a second, and a second who was about to ascend at that!

Umak turned to face the healer, and he posed the same question to him. “And what did he have to say, in his last moments of power?” The voice now was strained, and all effort at maintaining a dignified, collected demeanor was abandoned. His tone now was cold, and the question was posed as a dagger to the healer’s throat.

The healer glanced at Edam, but was chastised by Umak for his indiscretion. “Do not look at *him*. I am the one who asked you a question. And now I demand that you answer *me*.”

The healer was a gentle creature, and Edam could tell that he was sweating now. Edam held his breath, and he regretted ever putting the healer in such a position.

“Answer me! You fool, can you not respond when spoken to? Answer the question.”

“He did speak, Umak. But he was beyond sense at that point. They were words without meaning.” The healer’s voice was surprisingly level, and Edam was relieved that even he did not detect the fear he knew the healer must be experiencing.

Umak was undoubtedly enraged. His black eyes had narrowed to slits, and his thin lips were pursed together, forming a white line around his mouth. Edam held his breath, bracing himself for Umak's response. But when Umak did open his mouth again to speak, it was not the response the Edam was expecting. Instead of a reply spat out in anger, Umak's words were soft and deliberate.

"Perhaps you choose to keep the last conversation private now. I'll allow you that. But know this, Edam. Tuck the elder's words away in that tattooed head of yours. You'll need them." With one last glance down at the elder's body, Umak adjusted his robes and walked toward the doorway. Once there, he stopped and looked over his shoulder at Edam. "You are aware that your presence will be required at the ascension. As the Marked One, the others of the unity will be looking to you during this time of transition. If you do anything at all to disrespect me, Edam—anything at all—you have my promise that you won't live to regret it. I'll take that hide of yours with my bare hands and string you up from the tree myself. Do I make myself clear, Edam? Things will be different with the elder out of my way, *mark* my words." Umak opened the door and walked out without looking back.

The healer and Edam stood watching the open door, both feeling raw as a result of their encounter with Umak. After a moment heavy with silence, the two creatures looked at one another wordlessly; their expressions were full of angst and fear for the future of Arkhe, and for their own roles within a unity under Umak's leadership. Sadly, both creatures looked down to the bed, at the elder's body. Edam silently bid farewell to the period of tranquility that the elder had

fostered; it was a period that had ceased being as soon as the elder had breathed his last breath.

Some moments later, the elder's helper came back into the hut, carrying a large basin. When she set it down on a bedside table, Edam could see an herbal sachet floating in the water. Steam rose from the basin, and the air became fragrant with the smells of lavender and rosemary. Edam closed his eyes and swallowed. He had known of many creatures who had ceased being. None had ever made him feel this way—painfully empty.

“Edam, perhaps we should step out now and let the helper do her work.”

Edam opened his eyes and saw the healer standing next to him, with his left hand resting on Edam's shoulder. Edam felt almost as if his quivering legs would not carry him. But the healer continued to walk, and Edam followed. As they stepped out of the door, Edam glanced back to the bed. The helper was lifting the covers away from the elder's body. She caught Edam looking and paused in her work. The helper straightened herself to a standing position and gave Edam a sad smile. Edam nodded back at her, looked one last time at the elder, and closed the door behind him.

Once outside, the healer and Edam faced the somber creatures of the unity. All were looking at the two esteemed members expectantly, silently. Word of the elder's death had reached them, certainly, but there was more they wanted than news.

One of the female creatures stepped forward and grabbed the sleeve of the healer's robe. When she had his attention, she posed this question: "What will happen now?"

Edam and the healer looked at one another, then the healer responded. "The body is being prepared now. As soon as the preparations have been completed, we will have the tree ceremony. And tomorrow, when the sun is at its highest, there will be the ascension."

"Umak. Yes. That is what is making us worry. We fear for Arkhe when he ascends." The creature still held the healer's robe in her hands, and was now staring at him, silently pleading for some sort of response.

The healer stepped back from the crowd, his robe coming free in the process. Edam knew that the healer must show wisdom with his response. As the healer, and the soon-to-be second, the creature had great influence, but that influence did not come without a price. Honesty was something that could never completely be given, not without risk. Instead, the healer raised his arms in response to the crowd. They were already silent, but now they grew completely still and focused all of their attention on the healer standing in front of them.

"Creatures of the unity, do not fear this change. Arkhe faces a great shift, a transition of many things. But change is not something to fear. It is impossible for everything to exist without altering."

"But what of Umak?" The creature's voice was full of anger now, and the volume of her question rang out into the night and hung there in echoes.

“Umak will ascend, and he will lead us to great things.” The healer had responded, and had attempted enthusiasm. But his attempt had failed. Still, it was clear that his purpose—his goal—was not to create a rift between the creatures and Umak. He was a healer, and this mending mentality extended past bodily injury and sickness. Edam knew that, more than anything, the healer genuinely wanted to heal the unity itself.

Edam felt self-conscious standing there so silently. Although he, too, looked toward Umak’s leadership as the worst thing to happen to the unity in memory, he realized that his fear, and the fear of the others, was futile. And it was unfair for the healer to have to be the only voice to answer the questions of the creatures now. Taking a deep breath, Edam stepped forward slightly and began to speak.

“The elder offered each of us compassion and kindness, and he led Arkhe with respect and dignity. He has guided us well. It is true that he no longer stands before us, he no longer offers us his leadership. But we must not lose sight of the things he taught us. The elder would want each of us to face this change with grace and dignity, and to offer Umak the respect his position demands.”

The creatures who stood around Edam and the healer grudgingly accepted the words they had been offered. The issue could have been pressed, certainly, but to what avail? There was nothing that anyone could do to change the course of the unity now. Umak was to be the new elder, and that truth could not be forgotten.

Aive felt her breath quicken as Orda led her through the two remaining chambers. Orda did not pause, did not look back, but Aive could tell that her heart was like an anchor in choppy seas. At the main doorway in the gathering chamber, Orda finally stopped. Her hand reached for the doorknob, but she reconsidered. She pulled her hand away and instead led Aive down a corridor to the left.

“This way will be safer.” Her words were gilded with regret and sadness.

Aive spotted a door, hidden in shadows at the end of the hall. Orda again stopped, but this time she dropped Aive’s hand and slowly opened the door. She blinked, as if the darkness took her by surprise, scanned the horizon for trouble, and looked at Aive. With a quick nod of her head, she led Aive outside of the temple. They were to the left of the main entry, and this door had led them to a garden, with a grove of cypress trees just beyond. Orda led them through the bushes and flowers, now bathed in moon ray and shadow. Aive felt her heart react—How she longed to take her hands to the earth! How she longed to again feel the cool earth beneath her fingers. How she longed for home.

Orda led Aive into the cypress grove, and down a wooded footpath. It was clear that she knew this land well, for her movements were quick and confident over the uneven ground. Aive, though much younger, had trouble keeping up with her sure-footed companion. Orda and Aive were silent while walking, keeping their ears alert in case of trouble. When they were about one hundred paces from the temple, both creatures stopped cold when they heard a great rustle and commotion from the other side of the temple. There was a burst of light, as the

creatures mounted the temple platform, torches blazing brightly against the dark sky. Aive could make out voices—voices raised in eagerness, voices raised in fury. She thought of Morpheia, lying alone and ill in her private chamber. She started to pull away from Orda, twisting her hand out of the old creature's grasp. But Orda sank to the ground and pulled Aive with her. Orda wrapped her arms around Aive in an effort to prevent her from trying to make her way to the temple. Aive writhed as the creature held her down, for she could hear the sounds of doors being thrown off of hinges and crazed, jubilant shouts in the distance. They were the sounds of danger, and something inside of Aive pounded with each footfall, with each exuberant yell.

“She needs us, Orda! How can we leave her there? We have to go back.”

Aive choked on her words, on her anger at being restrained.

“Listen to me, Aive. We cannot go back. You heard Morpheia's words. We must make our way to safety. We must continue.” Aive could hear the pain in the older creature's voice, but she refused to stop her struggling. “Aive, stop fighting me and listen. We have to leave her. It is the way it must be.”

“They'll kill her if we go. We can't just let her cease.” Aive's voice was high now, panicked.

“Watch your voice, Aive. We mustn't let them hear us. Now listen to me. They will kill her if we return.” Orda's voice was tight, and Aive was silenced by the strain she heard. “They will kill *us* if we return. We must continue. You heard her. We must continue. She is ready for whatever comes from this. But her peace comes from knowing that you and I are safe.”

Aive gave up her struggle and simply sat, still enveloped in Orda's arms. Satisfied that she was not going to bolt, Orda freed Aive from her restraints of flesh and blood, although the two creatures were still touching. The two were silent now, listening to the sounds floating toward them from the temple. There were crashes from inside the chambers, and they could hear glass shattering and wood splintering. Shouts rose up, the words muffled by the activity. But soon, screams of disgust bellowed toward Aive and Orda, and the words were clear and unmistakable: "*Where is she?! Go! Find the oracle!*"

Orda stiffened, and Aive's breath caught in her throat. In the distance, they could hear creatures fanning out through the temple forests, and the sounds of brittle leaves and sticks breaking surrounded them. Aive looked at Orda, and silently searched for answers in the old creature's face. But Orda shook her head and put her finger to her lips, signaling the importance of silence.

As quickly and as quietly as possible, Orda reached out in the dark for Aive's arms, and the two creatures struggled to rise to their feet. Aive could feel Orda's warm hand reach out for her own and she allowed herself to be led further down the path. The branches overhead grew thicker, until the moon's rays barely illuminated the ground around them. Orda walked confidently, however, and Aive consciously put her trust in the old creature. Footsteps and shouts could still be heard around them, and the sound of splintering branches caused Aive to begin to shiver uncontrollably. The noises were close, and there was little cover separating them from danger, if not certain ceasing. Deep, angry voices called out in the night, and Aive was filled with fear. But there was something else that was

responsible for her shivers—one question consumed her, heightened by the fact that she was currently unable to ask Orda for an explanation. But then she wondered: *Does Orda even know where Morpheia is?*

Orda continued to walk for hours, and Aive followed her obediently. Eventually, the voices around them had grown dim, then had stopped altogether. Aive was certain that they were now a great distance from the temple. It felt good to at last be safe, but she worried still about the goings on at the temple. Questions plagued her thoughts, and she turned the puzzle over and over in her mind. Had Morpheia hidden in some secret chamber? Had she simply ceased being and somehow disappeared? The longer she thought of it, the more frustrated she became. She glanced at Orda, but in the moonlight, the old creature seemed as serene as she had earlier, when they were sitting peacefully outside of the temple. But Aive had seen the pain in Orda's eyes as she left Morpheia's chamber. Now, Aive wondered, did Orda have hope that Morpheia was somehow safe?

Aive was terribly intrigued by what she had witnessed at Morpheia's bedside. She had never seen such a display of emotion, and although she was touched still by what she had seen and heard, it was something she simply did not understand. Could not understand. Creatures grew ill and ceased being. Aside from becoming, it was simply the most natural process in a creature's lifespan. A loss was felt when a creature ceased to be, but only because it meant a work station would be vacant until another creature became...sometimes in a matter of days, sometimes within months. Tears came as a response to physical pain—when a speck of sand blew into an open eye, or when a finger was sliced open after

connecting with a blade. But she had never before witnessed tears being shed for *another* creature. It was absurd. Still, Aive felt changed by the experience.

Aive was lost in thought and did not notice when Orda slowed her pace, then stopped. Not paying attention, Aive nearly ran into the old creature in front of her, but she was able to stop just short of making contact. Aive looked around. The sun was now beginning to stir, and the sky on the horizon was barely tinged in soft pinks and oranges. It would be another hour at least before daybreak, but Aive felt relief flood through her with the knowledge that the night was nearly over.

Orda leaned back on a tree trunk, and she dropped her pack on the ground with a thud.

“We made it, Aive. I wasn’t sure we would.” Orda was not looking at Aive, and her voice was soft, raspy from the silence of the night.

Aive approached Orda, suddenly shy. She, too, came to rest against the tree trunk. “Where are we, Orda?”

“We are safe. That’s the only answer that matters now. There will be time for questions later. But now, be thankful that the journey was a successful one.” Orda looked at Aive. “Shall we have a morning meal? Why don’t you gather some firewood?”

Without waiting for a reply, Orda picked up her pack and walked on a bit, then stopped and looked back at Aive. With her free hand she pointed at something that was not yet in Aive’s line of sight. “Meet me there when you have a good bundle. I’ll go ahead and start preparing what I can.”

With a warm smile, Orda walked down the hill a bit, then disappeared behind a boulder. Aive had not realized how hungry she was, and her stomach began growling with the thought of food. Quickly, she scanned the forest floor for seasoned wood. It was an old forest; the massive trunks dwarfed Aive. Within several moments, Aive had an armful—as much as she could carry—of dry sticks and twigs. Satisfied that she had at least enough to get them through breakfast, Aive proceeded down the hill after Orda. As she rounded the boulder, Aive nearly dropped the wood, but she caught herself just in time.

There, in front of her, was a massive cave. The gaping mouth was at least twice Aive's height, and nearly four times as wide. Orda stepped out of the cave's shadows then, and motioned for Aive to come forward with the wood. Aive hurried toward her, passing pens of chickens, goats, and pigs on her way. A small, neat garden grew to the right of the entrance. Even in the dim light, Aive could easily recognize the leaves of wintergreen, feverfew, sage, and onion. There were other plants that were unfamiliar, and Aive made a mental note to ask Orda if she knew what they were. It was clear by now that this place had not been simply stumbled upon by chance alone; it was clearly inhabited. Rough, wooden chairs and tables were set about, and bundles of herbs and flowers decorated the mouth of the cave. Aive noticed some hides on a rack, curing. And although Orda had warned her about asking questions, Aive could not resist asking one now.

"What is this place?" Her voice was high with wonder and awe, and her eyes were wide, wanting to take it all in.

Orda chuckled, then replied, "This place? This place is my home."

"You *live* here? In a *cave*?" Aive was astonished, but if Orda was offended by the question, she did not show it. Instead, an amused smile tugged at her lips.

"Come, let's have a meal." Orda reached out, put her hand on Aive's elbow, and gently tugged Aive forward.

"And then?" Aive allowed herself to be led inside the cave. As soon as she stepped inside, she heard her footfalls echoing on the stone floor. At the spot Orda indicated, Aive bent and lowered the wood to the ground. She stood again and clapped her hands together, removing the few bits of dirt and leaves that had clung to her skin. "What happens after we eat?"

"Then we rest." Orda selected a few sticks and busied herself with making a fire. As she worked, Orda glanced up at Aive and continued. "Then we'll make good your supplies for the journey back."

"The journey back?" Aive looked down at Orda, who was now blowing gently on a small flame. When the fire took, she added a few small sticks and sat back to admire her work.

"Orda?" Aive knelt and looked across the tops of the flames in Orda's direction.

Without taking her eyes away from the fire, Orda offered Aive a simple reply. "You must return to Arkhe. Your work begins there."

After the elder's body had been washed, the drumming circle gathered in the center of the unity square and began pounding on the taut animal hides with

simple rhythms. The primal sounds called all unity creatures to the square. Edam waited in his hut until the drumming had stopped, then he emerged.

Everyone was already standing in the square, around the drumming circle. Umak and the healer were there, dressed in the simple white robes befitting an elder's ceasing-to-be ceremony. Edam himself wore the same. As Edam approached, the drumming circle parted. There, in the center of the circle, was the elder. His body was resting on a tall, wooden structure, and a white linen cloth covered his body from the waist down. The drum beats continued, and were soft and slow, very much like the pulse of a heartbeat. Edam walked toward the platform and only when he was at last standing beside it did he stop. The drums were silenced in the same moment.

Edam stood facing the body, and he was aware that the eyes of every creature in the unity were on him. There was silence this night, as if all of the birds and sounds of the forest had been quieted out of respect for the elder. Candles had been set up all around the platform, and the body was bathed in wispy, ethereal light. White smoke rose skyward. After the customary moment of pause, Umak began walking toward the forest, followed by the healer, who was slowly tapping two hollow reeds together. As Edam heard the healer pass, he took his cue to lift the body from the platform and follow.

Edam's fingers wanted to recoil when they first made contact with the elder's flesh. It was cool, and the muscles and tissues had hardened now; Edam's mind immediately compared the limbs to something wooden. Forcing himself to bend closer and lift, Edam braced himself and pulled the body up toward him. The

weight of the body was a surprise. The elder had not been a large creature, so Edam had not expected the physical burden to be this heavy. The emotional burden, too, was difficult to bear. With a deep breath, Edam turned from the platform, faced the creatures, and began walking. Umak and the healer were walking slowly, and were only a few paces ahead of Edam when he fell in line. The drummers walked in lines of four on either side of Edam and resumed their drumming, again with the sounds like heartbeats. The other creatures began walking then, in a single, cohesive group. Some of them carried candles, and all walked in silence.

The journey to the edge of the forest took several moments, and when the group arrived at the tree, Umak stepped to the left and the healer stepped to the right. Edam continued forward, leaving the drummers behind when he continued to walk and they did not. Edam approached the prepared tree and looked up. He could see that one side of the tree had been cleared, and that all of the limbs had been severed even with the trunk. Circles of black tar marked the places where the limbs had been, and the trunk looked like the spotted leopard that the Marking Clan had come across on one of their treks east.

Edam felt the presence of several creatures as they approached him. Edam held his arms wide and steadied the elder as flat as possible across them. The other creatures removed the linen from the elder's body and began to ready the ropes. They were knotted, then looped again and again around the elder's torso. Fatigued, Edam's arms began to quiver slightly. Selfishly, Edam thought to himself how useful a platform would be out here. As soon as the thought entered

into his mind, Edam pushed it out, ashamed. *This is the final thing that you will be doing for someone who risked so much for you; you owe it to him to complete your task without complaint. Without fail.*

The other creatures secured the ropes around the elder's shoulders, and Edam could feel the weight being taken from his arms as the elder's body slowly began to move upward. Three creatures hoisted the body up, and Edam watched as it rose, dangling, in the air. The nakedness was odd against the dark sky of early morning, and it was the lack of robes draping the body that made it all the more real. Around him, the drumming circle began to increase the intensity of the pounding. The heavy clap of hand against the tough hide of drum seemed to envelope the tree, and every creature surrounding it, in an urgent, yet comforting blanket of sound. The thumping beats seemed to reverberate within Edam, and he felt his insides vibrating.

After a few moments, the creatures who had been hoisting the body up stopped their pulling and straining. Two of them pulled the rope taut and leaned backwards, preventing the rope from slipping downward, while the other moved in back of the tree and secured it around a thick lower limb. At last, the creatures released their holds on the rope, stepped away from the tree, and moved into the crowd. The elder's body was now resting gently against the trunk of the tree, high above them. With all the unity looking up at the sobering sight, Umak walked over to the tree and stood in front of the trunk. He raised his arms and focused his gaze out over the crowd. The drummers, surprised by this sudden interruption, came to an abrupt and ragged halt in their playing. The unity creatures also were

startled out of their thoughts and reflections and turned to gaze at the second in front of them now.

“Creatures! Turn your attention to me this night! We come to honor the life of the one know as Elder. We come to turn his flesh over to the beasts of Sky and Earth.” Umak lowered his arms to his sides and began to point out at random creatures. His voice took on an angry quality as he began to speak again. “Now, who among you will stay to see that the feasting is done? Who among you will offer the next three days to the elder that was? Who among you will honor this first request of the elder to be?”

Edam stepped forward without hesitation. “I will stay with the body. It would be my honor to stay.”

Umak turned toward Edam the way a hawk turns to gaze upon his next meal. His eyes were cold and gray and he came closer to inspect the Marked One in front of him.

“Ah, Edam has come forth to offer himself for the duty. Edam himself has stepped forward and has said that he wants to watch as the elder’s body rots! He wants to watch as his cherished elder is ripped to shreds by beaks and claws. Edam himself. How appropriate.” Umak turned away from Edam, a disgusted expression on his face. “Now I ask again! Who among you will stay? Who among you will honor *me* and stay?” His jaws now were clenched, and his voice was tight and heavy in the air.

The crowd began to rumble in agitation. Had Edam not just volunteered to stay behind and observe the body, to complete this most important of rituals?

Boldly, Edam again stepped forward, and again he spoke. "Umak. I will stay with the body."

Umak whirled around at the sound of Edam's voice, and he quickly approached the marked creature, until the two were nose-to-nose. His eyes were blazing with rage, and his voice carried through the night air so that every creature was able to clearly hear Umak's bellowing words.

"You will stay? Is that what you have said to me, Edam? That you will stay? And who are you to tell me what you will and will not do? Make no mistake, Edam. I will not bend to your will like my predecessor. You will not stay. You are needed at the ascension tomorrow. You are the Marked One, Edam, and you will do your duty. Is that understood?"

Edam refused to look away, but he knew that he could not defy Umak's command. "It is understood."

Edam swallowed and breathed a sigh of relief when Umak at last looked away. Edam felt a swirling, burning anger rise up within him. Umak was now strutting out amongst the unity creatures, silently looking at each of them in turn. The creatures, Edam noticed, were avoiding Umak's gaze. They shifted uneasily as he moved among them, inspecting them.

Finally, Umak stopped in front of a meek-looking young creature. With a crooked finger, he lifted her chin so that she would be forced to look him in the eye. "You will stay." The young creature could only nod.

Edam looked over at the healer, who was staring intently at the trunk of the tree beside him, eyes bright and wide. His shoulders were rising up and down

and Edam suspected that the healer was just as enraged as Edam was. Umak was obsessed with power—everyone had known that. But to demonstrate that hunger tonight? At the ceasing-to-be ceremony for the elder? That was appalling, and it was clear from the stunned silence that the entire unity had witnessed first hand the change that the elder's departure would bring to them all.

Umak again walked toward the tree trunk. Again he raised his arms, and he kept them there while he thundered out the last of his speech. "Ica will stay with the body. All others will leave this place. When the sun grows high in the sky tomorrow, you are all expected to attend the ascension. It promises to be a glorious day. Now, disperse."

Umak lowered his arms and walked straight through the silent crowd, toward the unity square and to his hut on the far side of it. The crowd turned slightly to watch him go, then turned around once more, to face the healer and Edam, both of whom were still standing by the trunk of the tree. The healer raised his head and caught Edam's eye. A brief moment passed before the healer turned to face the crowd.

"This unity has lost a great elder tonight. Let us honor his memory. Let us make his legacy one of peace. Do not look upon Umak with anger or resentment. As difficult as this transition will be for all of us, do not let your anger and your fear control you now. Let your work for Arkhe continue. The elder has taught us well. Do not allow those lessons to wither and fade. Breathe new life into them. Together, we will endure this ascension." The healer paused. "But now, with the sun beginning to rise in the distance, it is time for us to leave this place, to leave

Ica to her noble duty.” The healer looked at Edam, and the two nodded at one another before the healer walked among his fellow creatures and led them back to the unity proper. Edam still did not move from the tree.

Ica shyly came forward when the others had left. She walked slowly and came to stand in front of Edam. She looked up at him and softly said, “I must watch the elder now, Edam.”

With one last, lingering glance upward, Edam offered the elder a final, silent farewell. Turning back toward the unity square, Edam heaved a leaden sigh. Although the official ascension ceremony would be taking place the following day, it was clear that Umak was already in control.

In the evening light, Arkhe seemed to be as peaceful now as it was when she had left it more than a moon earlier. And when her eyes at last settled on the unity below her, Aive felt her insides soften with relief. She was home.

The trip back had been largely uneventful. Unlike her trip to visit Morphea, she did not travel by way of Ashtad—her brush with them at the temple had smudged her with fear and worry; she had taken a longer route north to avoid coming anywhere near the lands of Ashtad. Instead, she had journeyed through the valleys of the Cetu Mountains. She never would have thought of that route; Orda had sketched out everything for her before Aive left the great cave.

When she thought of Orda, Aive felt a tremendous sense of loss. She had known the old creature for a half moon at most, yet she longed to go back to the cave. Orda had refused to allow Aive to stay with her, saying that her place was in

Arkhe, that her work would begin there. But she never explained what that had meant, only that Aive would need to be prepared for some sort of great change. In preparation for Aive's departure, the two females had gathered roots and herbs, trapped small animals, and tanned hides for boots and rope. When her last water bladder had been filled and her jerky sack could hold nothing more, Aive had stood before Orda, reluctant legs refusing to walk.

"Why must I go back? I think that I should stay here, with you. We should go looking for Morphea. She must need our help."

Orda ignored these comments, and instead continued infusing Aive with wisdom. "After two days' walk to the west, you'll come upon a great waterfall. Stop there, sleep in the cave hidden behind the falls. I've spent many nights there; there probably will be wood for a fire in a bundle, just as I've left it."

"I don't want to go back to Arkhe, Orda. There is nothing for me there. Please." Aive tugged on Orda's robes as she pleaded with the old creature, willing her to relent and let her stay.

"Aive. You must stop. Don't get yourself all worked up over this. You cannot stay here. You cannot stay with me. You must go back. You must." Orda cradled Aive's face in her hands, and at last got Aive to look back at her. "Listen to me. I know that you want to stay here. That it feels safer than the journey ahead of you. But this journey is one that you must take. Not for yourself, but for the good of all."

“I don’t understand.” Aive could feel her eyes burning. *Tears*, as Orda had explained a few days before, *water that flows from sadness and pain, joy and awe*.

“No. But you will. I promise you.” Orda lowered her hands and crossed them in front of her.

“Will I ever see you again? Will you ever visit Arkhe?” Aive shifted her travel pack nervously, uncertain if she wanted the truth to her questions or not.

“Our paths are meant to meet again. But where and when, I cannot say. Now, it is time for you to begin. You have everything you need?”

Aive nodded, swallowed her sadness, and tried to make her voice as light as possible. “And then some. Three loaves of bread; two bladders of water, two of tea; enough jerky to last for two moons; dried fish; berries; boiled eggs; a wool blanket; an extra set of boots; rain cloak; a wedge of goat cheese; and that dagger we made.”

“You have the herbs I gave you in case you need to make a healing paste?”

“Yes, they’re here in the side pocket.” Aive patted the bulging pack confidently.

“And you are positive that you have the vial?” Orda’s tone of voice changed, growing much more intense.

“It’s around my neck.” Aive tossed aside her braid so that she could get to the neck of her robe. After a moment, she drew the blue vial up from beneath the cloth. It was now securely fastened in a tight, protective cocoon made from thick

rope and sinewy strips of hide. The holder was made out of a single length of fresh rope, to ensure that it could not come loose as she walked.

Orda took a step forward and held the vial in her palm, tracing the outline of the strong rope web with her thumb. After a moment, she gently placed the vial back onto Aive's chest and looked, unblinkingly, into Aive's eyes. "You must not lose it. No matter what the cost, you must keep that vial with you always."

"I'll take care of it. I promise—I'll never take it off." Aive tried to smile reassuringly at Orda, but Orda did not return the gesture. Whenever they spoke of this vial, Orda always became very stern, almost cross. But she never once agreed to tell Aive what was inside or when the contents could be used. Eventually, Aive had stopped asking.

"Aive, you must keep that promise. And know this: The contents of that vial are useless to everyone except you, and they are useless even to you if used needlessly."

This was more information that Orda had ever given her before, but it was still a puzzle that seemed to have no solution. Orda watched Aive as she furrowed her brow, trying valiantly to grasp Orda's meaning. She smiled a little at the frustration that was so plain on Aive's face.

"Don't fret about this, Aive. There is no need to waste time on worry."

"But how do I know when to use it?"

"You will know. I can tell you nothing more."

"And I assume you'll tell me nothing more about Morphea, either?"

Aive's mouth bent crookedly with a playful smile, and this smile Orda returned.

“You and your questions!”

“You and your mysteries!”

The two creatures smiled broadly at one another. Aive had never felt particularly close to anyone, but she would miss Orda fiercely. She felt tears begin to well up in her eyes and she made no attempt to brush them away. Orda simply looked at her with compassion and held out her arms. Aive stepped forward into them. It must have been an awkward-looking embrace; Orda was much shorter than Aive, and the top of her head was about level with Aive’s collarbone. Still, the embrace was a long one. When they finally pulled away, both creatures brushed away a few random tears. Aive again adjusted her travel pack and then tucked the vial back under the collar of her robe.

Orda cleared her throat, looped her arm through Aive’s, and began walking away from the cave. “I’ll walk with you past the boulder.”

Their steps were sure and slow, deliberate. They walked wordlessly to the far side of the boulder; the cave was now out of sight. Orda freed her arm and turned to face Aive. It was difficult for her to take a full breath because her heart was beating so rapidly. Orda lifted her own wrist and raised up the sleeve of her robe. With her other hand, she unfastened a bracelet from her wrist. It was made of thin strands of rope, dyed lovely reds, yellows, and blues, and was beaded with carved bits of bone and shell. Aive had never seen her without it.

“Give me your hand.” Aive did as she was told.

As she fastened the bracelet around Aive’s wrist, Orda offered this simple statement: “For you.”

“Thank you, Orda. I wish I had something to give you in return...” Aive’s voice trailed off, as she mentally went through the list of the belongings she had with her.

“There is no need. I give this to you because I want you to have it, not because I desire something of yours in return. It is a gift, not a trade.”

“I will think of you whenever I see it. It is a fine gift.”

Aive fingered the bracelet, stalling, knowing that the time for farewell had arrived. Finally, she spoke, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Goodbye, Orda. I will miss you.”

“We will meet again. Keep that truth close to your heart.” She began to walk back down the path, toward the boulder. After a few paces, she turned again to face Aive. “Walk bravely into shadows. Emerge strong into the light. Journey well, Aive.”

Orda turned again and walked past the boulder. Aive turned in the opposite direction and took a step forward, into the mottled shadows of the forest floor.

PART II

The Trinity

Edam was standing in the center of his hut, feeling useless. Semija worked silently around him, gathering his belongings and packing them into woven baskets and satchels. Her work was efficient, her movements quick. Already most of his things were loaded up next to the door, awaiting the move.

It was still unbelievable, and Edam felt as if he had just awakened from some startling dream. But this was not something his imagination had thrown at him like a hunter with a spear. This was real. Edam felt his stomach churn with burning bile, and the bitter taste of rage filled his mouth.

Everything about Umak prior to the ascension had twisted his gut, but ever since the official ceremony—a ceremony full of feathered regalia and horns, tables of specially prepared foods, and pounding drum beats—the new elder had been almost unbearable to endure. He had immediately done away with several traditions. The first to go was the naming custom. Umak demanded that his name still be used, refusing to be referred to by his new title alone. He insisted that his name now defined the unity, and that a mere title would not capture his strength. This had appalled the creatures of Arkhe, but there was little that they could do with their discontent; the ageless system of rule stipulated that the elder have complete and utter control over all unity matters.

Umak's next regulation involved the establishment of punishments for unity creatures if they missed official ceremonies. A number of Arkhe creatures had not attended the ascension ceremony, and Umak had been livid. Edam had considered not attending, but his presence was required. As the Marked One, it had been his duty to lead the procession, and later, to put the elder's cloak around Umak's shoulders. When the ceremony was through, and the other creatures had gone back to their work stations or huts, Umak had approached Edam in the square.

"Edam, I have reached a decision." His shoulders were thrown back, triumphant.

Edam groaned inwardly. A decision, and likely one that was not going to be pleasant or appreciated. Still, a response was necessary. "What kind of decision, Umak?"

"I have been thinking a great deal about the elder's hut. My predecessor's hut, that is. I have chosen not to live there, but I have offered the dwelling to the healer, and he has accepted."

"But it is the elder's hut..."

"It has been in the past. But I think it worthy of a second, not of an elder. It is certainly not worthy of me."

"Your predecessor was content there."

"My predecessor was also a weak creature, and that dwelling fit him. It does not fit me, and I will ask you to remember who it is that stands before you." Umak's voice rose steadily.

“My apologies, Umak. Please accept them.” Edam bent his head forward and closed his eyes, striving to appear genuine. But he knew that the relationship between Umak and himself was nothing more than a civilized hatred. And sometimes, not so civilized.

“Yes, of course, Edam. I am sure that you simply misspoke. After all, how would it look for a Marked One to be so vile to the elder? To have the Marked One show such hostility when he is supposed to be so selfless? It is unthinkable.”

“Yes, Umak. It was a simple mistake.”

“Yes. Well. I will overlook this indiscretion.”

“And I am grateful to you.”

“Of course you are.”

Edam was not sure how to respond, so he opted to remain silent. The silence did not last for long, as it was clear the Umak was eager to divulge his latest policy.

“As I was saying, I feel that the elder’s hut would be better suited for the second. I have decided to live elsewhere.” He paused, a triumphant look in his eye. “In your hut.”

Edam slowly raised his head to look at Umak, and was sickened by the smug expression he found there.

“My dwelling?” His voice shook, and he no longer cared if his anger or his loathing for Umak was clear. “You want to live in my dwelling?”

“Oh, well not with you in it, I assure you. I expect to sleep there tomorrow evening, so I suggest you begin packing up your belongings immediately. And

make sure Semija does a thorough job of cleaning. I would rather not come in contact with any of your crumbs.”

“You can’t do this. That is my home. I live there!” Edam was revolted by the idea of Umak sleeping in *his* bed and walking on *his* floors.

“Oh, but Edam. Do you remember the ascension ceremony? And do you remember when you put the cloak around my shoulders? Well, it was in that very instant that I gained the authority to do anything I like. You, Edam, gave me that power. You, in essence, *invited* me to take your dwelling.”

“And where exactly do you want me to live?” Edam was trying to remain calm, but found it increasingly difficult.

“That is not an issue for the elder to sort out. I’m sure you’ll find somewhere to stay if you put a little thought into the matter.” Umak turned to walk away, but continued to speak. “Remember, Edam, you have until tomorrow at sunset. Do not make me wait.”

Now, as Edam watched Semija finish up the packing, his mind again began searching for a place to stay. He could stay at the dwelling that the healer would be vacating, but he had heard that the sick would still be kept there; having the healer live elsewhere was going to allow for additional cots. He thought of retreating to the forest, but he knew that Umak would never allow it. It was bad enough when a creature left the unity without permission, but when a Marked One left the unity proper, it was considered a serious indiscretion indeed. The unity was so protective of the Marked One, and so fearful that he would meet with danger, that it was strictly forbidden for one who was marked to leave the unity

unchaperoned. And those who did often paid a very dear price. Sometimes they would receive the mark of shame on some prominent part of their bodies, like their chest or face. But Edam had heard of other unities that had actually condemned their rebellious creatures, even Marked Ones, to a completely solitary life. They were allowed no contact with any other creatures whatsoever, and they ceased receiving the markings. Instead, they lived out their days under a black veil of shame. When they ceased being, they were oftentimes burned, and their ashes were scattered outside the unity perimeter; they were denied the opportunity to leave the unity in life, yet when they ceased being, their elders tossed them away in disgust.

Semija had begun cleaning the wooden floor with a soapy rag. She was down on her knees, bent over the slightly warped boards, boards that had been polished smooth by years of use. Edam felt himself in the way, but he had no idea of where he would go once he walked outside. So he sat in a chair.

“I appreciate your efforts, Semija.” Edam offered these words hesitantly. He rarely instigated conversation with Semija, but something about his current situation made him want to make an attempt at being social. He himself felt unwanted, and he hoped that she did not feel the same way.

Semija stopped her scrubbing and sat back on her heels. “You are thanking me?” She seemed surprised by his statement.

“Yes. I am.”

“Why?”

“Because you have been bringing me my meals and cleaning my robes for years now. And today, how you have helped me to gather my belongings. And now, you are washing the floors. You do so much.”

“I do what is required of me. Nothing more.” She bent over again and continued wiping down the wooden planks. “May I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“Where will you go when you leave this dwelling?”

Edam paused, unsure of how to respond. But in the end, he settled on the truth. “I have no idea.”

“Umak the Elder gave you no instruction?” Semija’s voice was high with curiosity, but then she looked up from her work and rushed on apologetically. “I am sorry. It was not proper of me to ask such a question. Please accept my apology.”

“Don’t apologize, Semija. No, I was not given any instruction, except to find someplace else to stay.” Edam sighed.

Semija looked beyond Edam for a moment, a thoughtful look on her face. “The one who left the unity—her dwelling remains empty.”

“The one who left?” Edam was silent in thought, trying to think of a name. “You mean Aive?”

“Yes. She still has not returned. I’ve heard many others say that she will not be coming back. It is much smaller than this dwelling, but at least you would have a place to stay.”

Edam stood up, intrigued by this new possibility. "You are certain it is empty?"

"Well, no one else has become in months. It must be. You should go and look there."

Edam walked over to Semija, who was still holding a sudsy rag, and knelt down so that he was almost at eye level with his helper. "Thank you, Semija."

She smiled uncertainly back at Edam, and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't deserve thanks. I am your helper." Semija again leaned forward and continued her cleaning.

Edam stood and left the dwelling, then crossed the unity square, in search of Aive's dwelling. He knew that all of the creatures of the gardens lived in the same group of huts, but he wasn't sure which one was Aive's. As he approached the little cluster of simple dwellings, he was momentarily taken aback. They were small, less than half the size of the dwelling he was leaving. He was instantly taken aback. Edam had long known that the creatures of Arkhe were different, but he had never before noticed that they were not equal. His hut was—or rather, had been—so large, and these dwellings were so tiny. Something stirred inside of Edam, something nameless, but something real..

Edam moved about hesitantly. He was not sure if he would be welcomed here. There still seemed to be some lingering bitterness among the worker creatures about Edam having worked in Aive's garden. The sun was high, and most of the creatures would soon be coming home for the midday meal. He quickened his step as he wove himself around the huts. He stopped to look into

windows (windows that were really just holes in the walls, sometimes covered up from the inside by tattered lengths of cloth) and into the handful of doorways that had been left open so that the breeze would find its way inside. Every hut he looked into seemed to be inhabited. There were bowls and cups left on the tables, or loaves of fresh bread cooling near the hearth. Edam had walked past all of the huts that faced the unity square, but he was surprised to find that there were a handful of other dwellings behind them, huts that faced the line of trees along the perimeter of the unity.

Edam crept over to those few huts and continued his search. He approached the second dwelling and carefully looked inside the window hole. The fireplace was dark and cold. The table was neat. Edam poked his head inside a little bit further and noticed that the air was different somehow. Stale. This was it. This was Aive's hut. He walked eagerly around to the door and opened it. Immediately, a surge of hot air came at him. Edam fanned the door back and forth several times, trying to draw the heat out. At last, he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

Aive stood on the hill on the north side of the unity. She intentionally had walked around to approach Arkhe from this direction because she could come through the perimeter forest and slip into her hut relatively undetected. She was aware that, sooner or later, the other creatures of the unity would have to know that she was back. But she wanted to postpone that inevitability for as long as

possible. She had experienced much during her journey to and from the temple, and she wanted to have time to reflect on all that had happened.

Aive began walking down the hill and entered into the thick grove of trees—the only thing now separating her from home. This forest was thick, dense with pine and spruce, oak and cypress. There was a green carpet of underbrush and moss, and Aive walked carefully to avoid tripping over the hidden roots. As she walked, Aive felt her body tense and her heart began to beat faster. For nearly a moon, she had been away from Arkhe without permission. And although the elder was a kind and patient creature, she was aware that she would certainly face some type of punishment. In the years since she had become, she had never known another creature to leave Arkhe without permission. Hunting parties, the Marking Clan, even groups that made the pilgrimage to the temple—they all had the blessing of the elder, if not the responsibility to the unity, to make such journeys.

Aive was getting much closer now, and was able to make out the vague shapes of huts through the thick branches that hung low in front of her. The sun was high, and Aive knew that she would have to exercise extreme caution if she was to go unnoticed. The creatures of Arkhe would be arriving home for the midday meal. Aive heard some voices approaching, and she crouched down among the tree trunks to hide herself. A small group of creatures passed her; they split and each went into their own hut. Aive let out a sigh of relief as they passed her without a second glance. She looked to her left and to her right, and, seeing no one approaching, she dashed across the small clearing between the forest and the

huts and slipped into her own doorway. She closed the door behind her, and leaned against the door frame for a long moment with her eyes closed. Images of the temple, of Morpheia ill in her bed, of the torches blazing, of Orda moving about her cave all swept through her mind, leaving Aive aching to be back with Orda more than ever. She felt her eyes water with sadness, but Orda's words sprang into her mind. *Your work begins there.* With a resigned sigh, she realized that she was meant to be here. Home.

She opened her eyes and allowed then to adjust to the unexpected darkness. She scanned the room, for the first time feeling a sensation of homesickness. But in the corner, a large, moving shadow made her muscles tense.

"Who's there? Show yourself!" Her voice was not much louder than a whisper, for she did not want anyone outside to hear her. "Come out!"

As Aive stared at the shadow, it began to move forward, and then it transformed from an anonymous patch of darkness into the most well-known creature of Arkhe. Aive felt herself inhale with surprise.

"Edam?"

He stepped forward now, completely out of the shadows. "I did not mean to startle you."

Aive was not so much frightened as she was puzzled. "What are you doing in my hut?"

"Well, I...that's a long story. I will explain, but first—are you injured?"

He came a few steps closer, brows furrowed with a look of concern.

"Injured? No, I'm not injured. Why?"

"When you first came in. I saw your eyes water. I thought that you were in pain."

"Oh. Well, it is a kind of pain, I guess. But not the kind that comes from injury."

"I don't understand."

"I barely do myself. But I appreciate your concern, Edam. Now, please, tell my why you are here." Aive was not at all angry, but she was extremely curious. "Let's sit." She motioned to the table, and Edam moved forward. She shrugged the travel pack off of her shoulders and took the chair opposite him.

After they were both seated, Edam reluctantly began speaking. "Much has happened since you left."

"Tell me?" She leaned forward on her elbows expectantly.

"Umak is elder." Edam paused before saying anything further. He knew that he would be unable to keep his emotions in check if there was much discussion about the ascension, and he did not yet know how Aive would react to the news; perhaps she was one of the few who supported Umak.

"The elder ceased being?" Aive's voice was thick with disbelief.

"Not long ago, he grew ill in the night. The healer was there. His helper. I was there. The tree ceremony took place that night, and the ascension the following day."

"And the healer is the new second?"

"Yes."

“And why you are here?”

“Umak...well, Umak decided that he wanted to live in my dwelling, not in the elder’s hut. He told me to find another place to live. He’s had it out for me ever since...” Edam caught himself before he could say it. How would Aive react to the news?

“Ever since what?”

“Umak did not agree with his predecessor. Especially where I was concerned.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“Well, I went to the elder, as I had many times before. To speak with him about my role here.”

“You’re role as the Marked One?”

“Yes, but more than that. I went to him because I wanted to do more than just be marked. Especially after the last marking, I felt...trapped by my duty.”

“You aren’t happy as the Marked One?”

“I am honored to be marked, but my days are long without anything to fill them. I went to the elder in search of something more that I could do to help Arkhe.”

“And what did he tell you?”

“I went many times to speak with him. And always before, he would tell me that being marked is a noble and honorable existence. My concern should be serving Arkhe, not my own happiness. Being marked was my duty.”

“And what did he tell you the last time?”

“He was ill, Aive. I pushed him, and I think he gave in because he no longer wished to argue with me.”

“The elder was wise and strong. But fair. I’m sure that you pushed him into nothing he did not already want to happen.”

“But he was weakened with illness.”

“Illness of the body, yes, but was his mind clear when you last spoke with him, Edam?”

“Yes, but...”

“Edam, you carry your guilt like a stone. But the elder made a choice to give you what you longed for—you didn’t force him.”

Edam looked Aive directly in the eye. “How can you be so sure?”

“You and I have spoken little more than simple greetings. But I have seen you often—at all of the marking ceremonies—and I always noticed how much you respected the elder. And how much he respected you. I don’t think that you would have ever done anything to cross him.” Aive paused to allow her words to sink in for a moment, then continued gently. “Please tell me what happened to bring you here?”

Edam took a deep breath. “Well, the last time that I went to him, the elder told me that if I wanted to, I could look after your garden while you were away.” Edam saw the shock register on Aive’s face, and he rushed forward to explain. “He said that you had already planted, and that I really wouldn’t have to do much at all. Basically, I walked around a lot. Looked at things. Sometimes I watered the plants if they looked dry...”

“I don’t know what to say. I can’t seem to picture you in the garden!”

“You are angry, Aive?”

Aive stood up and went to the window. “No, I’m not angry, Edam. It is strange to think of another creature in my garden, that’s all. But I had to be elsewhere, and I am grateful to you for looking after things while I was gone. It was kind of the elder to suggest such a thing.” Aive turned back to Edam. “How did everyone else react?”

“With anger. Feelings of betrayal. The others stared at me while I worked. And Umak paid me a visit. He told me that things would be different after he was elder. And they are.” Edam shrugged sullenly. “He took my dwelling. As punishment for my talks with the elder who was.”

“Umak forced you out of your hut for that? I can’t believe it.” Aive shook her head, as if trying to fathom this twisted series of events. “You live here now?”

“Well, I was here because Semija—my helper—suggested that I consider it. There was talk that you were not coming back...” Edam’s words trailed off uncertainly.

“I wasn’t sure myself that I would be back. I didn’t want to return, but it was not my choice to make.”

Edam could contain his question no longer. “So where were you, Aive?” Edam shook his head and held up his hands apologetically. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to tell me. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“That’s a question I will have to answer soon enough.” Aive breathed in deeply. “I went to the temple.”

“The temple! By yourself?” Edam’s eyes grew wide. Such a journey was rarely made, and never was it made alone.

“I had to. I had to go back.”

Aive began walking back to the table, to share the events of her journey. But just as she was sitting down, loud, angry voices sounded outside. Edam stood, sensing trouble. An instant later, the door was flung open, left to swing back and forth a bit from the force. Umak stood in the doorway, face contorted with fury. Members of his entourage stood behind him. Umak lunged forward into the room, looking first at Edam. But once he realized that Edam was not alone in the room, Aive soon became the object of his focus. He came close to her, then hissed in her ear, “So. You have returned.” When she did not respond, he forcibly pushed her into the chair and turned his attention to Edam.

“You knew about this? Is this yet another thing you do to spite me? Speak!”

Umak’s words echoed briefly in the room, and Edam saw Aive shudder. The new elder walked slowly over to Edam. His hands clenched and unclenched. His stare was cold and unyielding.

“Well, are you going to respond? Or are you just going to stand there like the useless heap of flesh that you are?”

Aive rose, coming to Edam’s defense. “I’ve only just come back. Edam didn’t...” Umak turned around and silenced Aive by slapping the back of his hand across her cheek.

“I was not addressing you! You will not speak again to me unless I direct you to do so! Sit in the chair and remain silent.”

Umak’s jaws were still clenched when he turned again to face Edam. “I will ask you once more: Did you know that she was back?”

Edam swallowed, weighing his options. He decided that the truth was safest for them both. “Like Aive said, Umak, she has only just arrived. I was here when she returned.”

Umak narrowed his eyes in thought. “Yes. I went to your...*my* hut in search of you. After some...persuasion, your helper finally told us where you were.”

“You didn’t harm her!” Edam stepped forward defiantly.

“She was a challenge to break. Your servant is loyal. I will give her that.” Umak chuckled menacingly and turned to look at both Aive and Edam. “You both have shamed me. You have shamed Arkhe. And that deserves punishment. Sit, Edam.”

Umak gestured to the members of his entourage; they entered the hut and then closed the door behind them.

“Aive, while you were away, I made some changes. Any creature who is not present at an ascension must be disciplined. And, if I combine that with the shameful act of leaving Arkhe without permission, well, you must pay dearly for your indiscretions. You will remain in this hut for one complete moon. You are forbidden to step outside. And your hut will be under the watch of my guards, so I will know immediately if you try and escape.” His voice sounded almost pleasant,

light, as if he were receiving much enjoyment from doling out such a harsh punishment.

“What of my garden?”

“Your garden? You worry now about your garden when you left it behind so willingly before? Your garden will grow without you. In fact, I will reassign it to another creature. You will not work there again.”

“But I...”

“You speak as though that decision is up for debate. It is not.” Umak stared Aive into submission, then turned his attention to Edam.

Edam shifted a bit under Umak’s gaze, waiting for the anger he knew was sure to come.

“Edam, Edam, Edam. You have been a thorn in my side, haven’t you? A prickly, unruly thorn. I would like nothing better than to see you skinned.” Umak smiled. “Would you enjoy that Edam? Would *that* at last make you fulfilled? Ha!” Umak stood and walked around the cramped hut with his hands clasped behind him. “What would you have me do, Edam? Tell me.”

Umak’s tone was mocking, but Edam knew that he could not risk being unresponsive. “I...perhaps...perhaps I could live with the healer.”

Umak turned. “The healer?”

“He is Second. I would be forced to obey his command.”

“The healer is as weak as my predecessor ever was. He’s a sympathizer. No, I do not wish to entertain your suggestion, Edam. I have made up my mind. You will be shackled. The other end of your chain will be secured outside Aive’s

door. You will bring her food. You will carry her filth. You will remain in those chains for as long as she remains in confinement." Umak turned to a member of his entourage. "Go. Bring as many lengths of chain as you can find."

Edam awoke to the sound of thunder, and he squinted as raindrops began to fall. He flinched. Umak had forced Edam to remain chained wearing only simple trousers, and his torso, arms, and face were sun baked. Umak had wanted Edam's flesh to roast, and it had. Over the last 27 days, he had burned and peeled repeatedly. It was something that Edam had never before experienced; in the past, Edam had always been instructed to cover himself well, to protect the markings. But Umak had made it clear that the markings meant very little to him. He was eager to have a fresh Marked One, one who would bear the markings of the journeys made under his leadership.

The drops of rain fell hard, irritating already raw skin. Edam tried to curl himself into a tight ball, and he moved as close to the wall of Aive's hut as he could. But the roof offered no hangover, and the protection Edam received was minimal. The rain began to fall harder, and then the raindrops were joined by hail the size of pebbles. These bounced off of the ground—and off of Edam's skin—with painful thuds.

Umak had posted guards by Aive's door continually. An awning had been built to protect these creatures from the elements. On this night, the creature sat huddled beneath the awning, clutching his thick robe and blankets around him. Even so, the rain was falling and blowing so hard that he already was soaked to

the skin. But this creature took pity on the helpless Edam and tossed him one of his own woolen blankets.

“Edam! Cover yourself with this!” The creature had to yell to be heard above nature’s din, and Edam gratefully grabbed the blanket and covered himself with it, too cold and wet to offer more than a quick nod of thanks. The blanket was sopping, and did little to protect Edam from the driving rain, but the soft fabric did lessen the sharp blows of the icy hail. Edam again tucked himself into a ball, and he was able to stretch the blanket to cover all but his ankles and bare feet.

The hail eventually stopped, but the rain lasted until morning. The ground was soggy, and when Edam stood to complete his morning chores, he was covered in slippery mud. He tried to rinse himself in the rain, but it had slacked to a drizzle and he succeeded only in smearing it. With one corner of the wet blanket, he wiped away what mud he could reach. As he cleaned himself, he noticed that there were several places on his skin that were very sore to the touch. Once he got enough mud off to even see his skin, Edam found a number of tiny blue splotches on his arms and legs. Bruises. Bright blue bruises against red, marked flesh. *What a sight.* He winced and gingerly continued clearing away the mud. It was only after this was done that he looked up and realized that there was no creature currently posted under the awning. Edam turned all around, searching for a creature lurking about, but saw no one hidden in the shadows.

For the first time in nearly a moon, Edam was alone and unwatched. Thoughts of all kinds entered his mind. Escape. Releasing Aive from her prison

and setting her free. He lifted his wrist, considering the possibility of removing himself from the web of chains. But the wrist braces were iron, thick, and unyielding. They were tight around Edam's wrist already, and there was no way that Edam could squeeze his hand through. And even if he was able to remove the wrist braces, he would still have to contend with the equally tight braces around his ankle. With a frustrated sigh, Edam yanked on his chains, then flinched when the edges of the metal bit into his tender skin. He was trapped. But the truth was that had he been able to escape his chains, he probably wouldn't have. If Umak remained true to his word, then Aive only had four full days of confinement left. It would be foolish to run now, for if they were found, harsher punishments would be sure to follow.

Edam stood against the wall of Aive's hut, near the door. Without a member of Umak's entourage there to enable Edam to complete his morning chores for Aive, he could do little. Planks of wood had been nailed into place on either side of Aive's door, and chains wound around and around the boards, secured with a heavy lock. The guard on duty had the only key. Even when Edam stretched as much as he could, he was only barely able to see into the closest window; the opening was more than an arm's length away. At mealtimes, Umak always sent someone to give Edam a tray of stale and overripe foods, and it was his job to prepare it the best he could for Aive and himself. The guard would turn the key in the lock and unwind the chains, and only then was Edam able to set the food down in the doorway, where Aive scrambled to get it like a crazed dog. As

soon as she had grabbed it, the door was again wrapped in chains and the guard pocketed the key.

Edam hated the chains, and he despised how trapped and vulnerable they made him feel. But now, when he was unable to do anything for Aive, he felt even worse. Edam stretched as far as the chains would allow and got as close to Aive's window as possible.

"Aive? Can you hear me? Come to the window."

Edam heard movement from inside, and waited for Aive to appear. After a moment, her face appeared in the small window hole. It was high and small, and Edam could only see Aive's eyes and nose through it.

"Edam?" She glanced down at Edam and gasped, "What happened to you?"

Edam looked down and realized that she was referring to the bruises. "The storm last night. There was hail."

"I heard it. It sounded bad. Do they hurt?"

He shrugged. "They aren't too bad if I don't press on them. But they make me want to be free of these things even more." He raised his arms up to the window as much as he could, allowing her to get a glimpse of his shackles.

"What comes next, Edam? After four more days, then what?"

Edam held her gaze, wishing more than anything that he could give her an answer that he knew to be true. But he had been wondering the same thing. "I don't know what happens next. If Umak keeps his word, we'll be released. But after that, I...I can't even guess."

"I can't return to the gardens. The whole time I was away, I yearned to be back there. And now I can't even go near them."

"Maybe you'll be assigned to another work station."

"Maybe. But what about you? You have no hut. Your things have been ruined." She glanced to the edge of the trees, where Edam's belongings had been dumped in a large pile. From her window, she could make out robes and woven rugs and wooden carvings. His simple furniture and straw mattress were flung on top of the heap. She could only imagine how Edam felt, being forced to stare at his things without being able to go near them. But then she realized—she would know soon enough, as soon as she saw another creature working in the garden she had nurtured.

Edam spoke again, drawing her quickly from her own thoughts. "Maybe some things can be saved. The robes at least. When I can wear them again, that is." Just imagining the cloth touching his skin now was unbearable.

Edam's stomach began rumbling, and he knew that Aive must be getting hungry as well. "I'm sorry, Aive. I haven't been brought any food. I have nothing to offer you."

"Did you speak to the guard?"

"There was no guard there when I woke up. There still isn't."

"No guard? But we've always been watched." Aive began to worry, and her fear made her voice waver. "Maybe Umak wants to do something else to us. Set fire to the hut. Leave us here without food or water until we starve."

“Don’t speak of such things. Everyone knows of our punishment. How would they react if he were to do something so foolish now, when we are so close to release?”

“Edam, we speak of Umak. Do you really believe that he cares what others think of him?”

“Shh. Aive, keep your voice down. We don’t know who’s about. We must be careful.”

“Careful? Look at where careful has gotten us!” Aive left the window and refused to come back, no matter how many times Edam tried calling her name. Finally he gave up and went to sit down in the small patch of shade that the hut now provided.

He leaned his head back and dozed uneasily, still unaware of the commotion taking place in the unity square.

It was early afternoon when Edam roused, and that was only because he heard the guard’s boots squelching through the mud as he approached. Edam opened his eyes and turned his head, seeing the guard who had given him the blanket the night before. It was impossible to read the expression on his face, and Edam did not dare ask about the day’s strange events. But he did notice that the guard carried a tray full of food—loaves of bread, a couple of wedges of cheese, some roasted fish, and several plums. It was yet another mystery—the typical food for the day would be stale or nearly rotten, under Umak’s strict instructions. This food was fresh and ripe. And, thankfully, already prepared. The fish was still

steaming, and the aroma made Edam aware of his own intense hunger. Quickly, he divided up the food and set his portions on the blanket. The guard was already unwinding the chains from around Aive's door, so Edam stood up, ready to offer her the tray.

When the door was unlocked, Edam scurried like always to get the tray inside the hut before the door came closed. But this time, the guard seemed preoccupied and dawdled. There was no rush to close the door. Instead, he simply watched as Aive picked up the tray and moved it onto the table. Edam, unsure of how he should respond, simply stood there silently.

The guard looked at both of them thoughtfully. He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it before any sound could escape. But he looked down and sighed and again opened his mouth to speak.

"I am sorry for the delay. A creat...there was a becoming today." His words were soft, and both Aive and Edam had to move closer to hear what was being said. Still, the guard looked to the muddy ground, which he absentmindedly tapped with the toe of his boot. "It has angered Umak."

Aive and Edam exchanged a puzzled glance. A becoming was a common event, and certainly not one that had ever caused anger. If anything, a becoming was a sign of a unity's luck, and it always meant that another set of hands had arrived to take on a share of the work. Edam looked at Aive, then at the guard. He momentarily wondered if they could trust the words of this creature, or if the guard was simply telling them something that Umak wanted them to hear. But although Edam had not known the creature well, he did know that he, like all

members of Umak's entourage and guard, had been forced into servitude after the ascension. He was only guarding Aive and Edam, and keeping them in their punished states, because he did not have the power to do anything else. Umak controlled his life just as he controlled Edam and Aive's.

Throwing a cautious glance around him, Edam decided to push the guard for information. "Why was Umak angered?"

"I have been instructed not to say..." The guard paused for a moment before continuing, "but I guess you'll know soon enough. The becoming. It was different than the rest." He shook his head. "Umak thinks it is a bad omen. He thinks it will bring shame." A look came over his face, apparent guilt for having said too much.

Aive came forward a bit, now standing completely in the doorway and nearly in the fresh air for the first time in almost a moon. The guard showed no alarm at her position, and she was no threat. But her curiosity now was rabid, and she silently urged the guard to continue.

"The creature—if you can even call it that—is not like the rest of us. It is..."

"What? What is it?" Aive was standing in front of the guard now, and her breathless questioning was nearly silent. For the first time in a moon cycle, Aive felt alive. She felt as if this bit of news was somehow related to the work that Orda had so often insisted was to begin here. "Tell us, please!"

"I...I have said more than I ever should have. I'm sorry. I can say no more. I have to close your door." He began to back up and gather the chains in preparation for the locking, but Aive grabbed his wrist and looked him in the eye.

"I beg you. Please, don't let harm come to it. No matter the consequence. You mustn't let it be harmed."

Edam looked at Aive quizzically, then glanced to the guard. The guard's gaze was still being held by Aive, and his eyebrows were raised in surprise.

The guard broke the stare and again fiddled with the chains. "That is not something I have any control over."

"Do what you can! Please." Aive tugged now at the guard's sleeves, pleading with him.

Edam, startled by the entire conversation, broke the uneasy tension by changing the subject. "Uh...has there been any word about where I will live when we are released?"

Aive looked at Edam, with a look of betrayal in her eyes. She released the guard's sleeves angrily and walked back inside her hut, where she slowly paced back and forth. The guard, preoccupied with Aive's words, replied with a simple shake of his head. He shut the door, rewound the chains, and turned the key in the padlock. After he pocketed the key, he remained at the door, staring as if looking through the wood. Finally, he backed away, glanced at Edam, and left without a word.

Edam stood by the door, confused by the conversation, especially so by Aive's reaction to the news of the becoming. She had been in a foul mood all day,

he reasoned, so it was best to sit down and eat the food. Still, as he downed the food ravenously, Edam could not help but hear Aive inside her hut. She was not pacing now, but she was making wet sniffing noises that made Edam squirm. There was something about this becoming that had upset Aive greatly, and from the way the guard had spoken, the same was to be said about Umak. From the position of Aive's hut, Edam was nowhere near the unity square. Still, he turned his head to look in that direction, at all of the huts that stood in his way of getting a clear view. He saw nothing that was out of the ordinary, nothing at all that would offer him any explanation. But he felt a shiver come over him with the thought that somewhere, in a place he could not see, something significant was occurring. And with that shiver came the familiar twinge of anger. *If only Umak was not elder, I would know what that something was.*

The next few days dragged on, seemingly without end. The rains still came, and Edam's clothes had yet to dry out completely from the rainstorm that had bruised him with hail stones. A different guard came to and from the hut three times each day, each time with a tray of food. There was no conversation, and neither Aive nor Edam was careless enough to inquire about the becoming. Whenever the door would open to her hut, Edam would try and meet Aive's eyes, wanting to try and apologize to her. But she refused to look him in the eye. Instead, she kept her head down, silently taking the tray or leaving her chamber pot. In the mornings, when the guard always brought the fresh water, Edam would fill her basin with the warm liquid. Sometimes, when the basin was full and the

water grew still, Edam caught her reflection in the pool. It scared him how very sad she looked.

On the final morning, the most recent guard approached with two other creatures: the guard who had offered Edam his blanket and the healer. Edam stood in surprise, and nodded his head at the unexpected visitors. There was no food tray, but the guard who had offered Edam the blanket held a bundle. He opened the sack and removed a fresh robe, which he handed to Edam. Then he reached into the bag again and removed a new pair of sandals.

“Put these on, Edam. After you wash.”

“Why?” Edam asked this question of the guard, but he had already moved toward Aive’s open door with the bundle. So Edam instead turned to the healer with the question lingering in his eyes.

“There is to be a meeting at midday. With Umak. You and Aive will be taken to his dwelling. It is his desire to see for himself if you both have learned enough during your time in confinement to be freed.”

“If we’ve learned enough! But it was agreed—one moon cycle. He never said that it could be longer!” Edam felt terrible frustration and anger at the thought of remaining chained for even a day longer. “Why does he take such great pleasure in seeing others suffer?”

The healer sighed heavily, then put an encouraging hand on Edam’s shoulder. His words were soft, but clear. “He is still adjusting to his position of power. But his confidence has been tempered since you saw him last.”

“The becoming?”

The healer's eyes grew wide with surprise, then he offered Edam a weary smile. "Yes. The becoming. But you must not speak of it to him. That will surely see you back in chains."

"What happened?" Edam glanced at the hut, then back at the healer. "Whatever it was, Aive hasn't said a word since she found out about the becoming."

The healer looked thoughtfully at the hut for a moment, then began to speak. "There is much we do not know about Aive's journey. Perhaps there is another reason for her silence." He patted Edam's shoulder, then began walking toward the hut. "She will speak when she is able to."

The healer escaped into the doorway of Aive's hut, and the guard who had given Edam the robe and sandals approached. Before he reached Edam, the guard shook his head and said, "I cannot answer your questions." He dropped the empty sacks at Edam's feet, and fished around in his pocket for a moment. Finally, he withdrew a key and reached for Edam's hands. The shackles fell from Edam's wrists with a thud, and Edam rubbed the newly exposed, raw flesh gingerly as the guard bent to free Edam's ankle.

"It feels good to be out of those. Thank you."

The guard looked at him and shrugged, "I am only obeying orders." But then he lowered his voice and busied himself gathering the shackles and chains. "Beware of Umak, Edam. The becoming has..."

The guard's remaining words were never heard, interrupted by the healer and the other guard leading Aive out of her hut. She squinted when she had fully

emerged from the doorway, and Edam could see her breathe a sigh of relief. The healer walked to her right, and the guard stayed on her left side, securely holding her arm. She carried her new robe and sandals, and as they passed by Edam, she actually caught his eye and offered him a smile. He returned it eagerly, relieved that some connection had at last been made. The remaining guard put the last of the chains into the empty sack and held Edam's elbow lightly. With a slight nudge, the guard urged Edam forward.

The small group made their way to the healer's former dwelling, the hut that now exclusively housed the sick. As they stepped inside, the sweet smell of incense enveloped them. The guards posted themselves by the door, and the healer led Edam and Aive past the now-empty cots toward the back wall. A high wooden table held a number of basins of steaming water, and the healer handed each of them a fresh cake of patchouli and mint soap. He instructed them to put their new robes and sandals on a nearby cot so they could wash, and then he busied himself on the other side of the hut, mixing something with mortar and pestle.

Aive and Edam removed their foul-smelling clothing and eagerly began washing. The soap cakes lathered, and the patchouli seeds ground away at the dirt-crusting skin. Edam gasped as his burned skin rebelled at the washing, but he continued on gingerly. Aive bent her head over a basin and used her hands to wet the back of her head. She ran the cake over her hair again and again, then moved her fingers through her hair until her head was covered in frothy white. She delighted in the feeling of being clean again, and only when she could no longer

run her fingers over her bare skin and feel grit did she stop washing. At last, she rinsed herself with the washrag the healer had offered and dried with a length of smooth-soft hide. It was the most content she had been since her arrival back in Arkhe. She stretched her muscles and sank down onto the soft cot.

As she reached over for her clean robe, her eyes strayed to Edam. The sight of him struggling to remove all of the caked-on dirt that had accumulated on his skin over the last moon cycle made her smile. He dripped liquid mud, and he now stood in a pool of thin brown sludge. Streaks of dirty water were drying on his skin faster than he could wipe them away. The healer had already brought Edam several rags, and all were brown now, useless. Aive stood and walked to a clean basin, where she took her cake of the patchouli soap to her own rag. She scrubbed it clean, then rinsed it. Finally, she lathered the rag once more and walked over to Edam. He turned around as she approached him, unsure of her intent. But she smiled easily and came up behind him.

“I’ll help you.”

He turned back around and offered a mumble of thanks.

Aive raised the rag to Edam’s neck, attacking patches of mud that he probably did not even know were there. She felt him wince, and she began rubbing his skin even more gently. She slowly scrubbed at his skin until his markings showed through completely and then she moved the rag down to his shoulders. As she washed him, her eyes strayed, following the dark lines that covered his skin. A mountain range was etched along the left side of his back, and disappeared over the curve of his hip. A river snaked its way down from his

hairline and followed his backbone, where it met with a lake in the small of his back. Unities and forests dotted his skin. Meadows and rocky pathways were marked in surprising and glorious detail. Edam bent slightly to wash his right leg, and she smiled as the markings contorted with the movement, the lakes rippled, and the river momentarily came to life.

Aive continued washing the skin, suddenly aware of the closeness. She could feel her pulse quicken and heat growing, flowing out to her limbs. It was an odd sensation, and it was new. It was not altogether unpleasant, but the feeling frightened her. She hurried with the washing now, eager to be finished, and dry again, and safely tucked inside of her clean robe.

At last, when Edam's flesh was free of dirt, they put down their rags and began drying. Edam seemed eager to be out of the dwelling, too, and the two did not speak as they dried and dressed. The healer came over with a crock of ointment and a stiff-bristled brush. He handed the brush to Aive and began applying the ointment to Edam's swollen wrists and burned skin. Aive brushed out her hair as it dried and watched the healer work. But then she could feel eyes on her. Edam's eyes. She met his gaze, and their eyes locked. Aive could feel it again—a warmth growing inside of her from the pit of her stomach. She swallowed and looked elsewhere, but her eyes soon darted back to meet Edam's. His eyes were still focused on her, and this time she did not look away.

The group of five approached Umak's dwelling. Edam was aware of the rustling of Aive's robes beside him, and he yearned to look in her direction. But

for some reason, he could not meet her eye. He instead focused on the hut, now directly in front of them. Out of sheer instinct, Edam felt the sensation of homecoming, but he fought it stubbornly. The hut was no longer his home; that was clearly evidenced by the changes the hut had seen under Umak. Two guards were posted outside the door, and the door had been changed from one made of plain wood to one that had been decorated with colorful inlays. Now, in the sun of midday, the inlays shone, illuminated. Edam stole a glance in Aive's direction, and he noticed that she seemed to be transfixed by the decorations on the door. Her eyes scanned the inlays, as if she were searching for something. Her breathing was heavy, agitated, and he heard her give a sudden gasp, along with a jumble of words he could not make out. It looked as if Aive was remembering something, and Edam longed to know what.

Edam opened his mouth to speak to Aive, to ask her if she was alright, but the healer caught Edam's eye and quickly shook his head from side-to-side. Edam closed his mouth and instead focused on the door, which was now opening to reveal Umak's personal chamber. A member of Umak's entourage opened the door and ushered them inside with a blank, obedient stare. The healer walked through the doorway first, followed by Aive, Edam, and the two guards who had escorted them. After the last creature was through the doorway, the door quickly closed, immediately bathing the hut in darkness. Behind them, flames flickered to life as a table of candles was lit by Umak's helper. Once the room was aglow with the dancing light, Umak emerged from behind a screen. He was wearing thick, purple robes, and he carried a scepter. But when Edam looked more closely, he

realized that it was the Marking Stick—the very one that had marked his skin—although it looked nothing like what he remembered. Umak had changed it. Edam bit his tongue to keep from speaking, but inside he was furious. By all rights, not to mention tradition as far back as anyone could remember, the Marking Stick belonged to the Marked One, and to the Marked One alone. It was to stay with the Marked One even when he ceased being. It was strapped to the skinned body as it was hoisted up the tree. The Stick recalled the pain and the sacrifice that marked the life and the skin of the Marked One, and to carve it and dye it, as Umak had done, was a disgrace to the Marked One's entire existence.

Umak watched Edam for a moment, and a smirk came to his lips. "You like my scepter, Edam?"

Edam would not, could not meet Umak's eyes, but he forced himself to nod slightly in response.

"I can't hear you, Edam. Please speak up." Umak stepped closer to Edam and he held the Marking Stick across both of his hands, at the level of Edam's eyes. "You see what I have done? I have used your Marking Stick. You weren't using it, and I hated to see it go to waste. Look at it, Edam. It's lovely, don't you think?"

Edam took a deep breath and forced the anger out of his voice. "Yes. It is lovely." He even managed to glance up and look Umak in the eye, in spite of the stomach that was twisting with fury. He knew that he was being tested, and one wrong move on his part could mean another moon in chains for him, and possibly another moon of confinement for Aive. Edam would not allow Umak that

satisfaction, and he vowed to remain calm and respectful. He silently urged Aive to do the same. If only he could have had a chance to mention this to her outside. He could only hope that she also thought obedience was their best course of action.

Umak eyed Edam for a lingering moment, and then turned his attention to Aive. She looked him in the eye, and Umak smirked in response. He drew quite close to her, so that his eyes were level with hers and their noses were just inches apart.

“You enjoyed the time in your hut, Aive?”

Edam could see Aive struggle to verbalize an answer. She had two choices, as far as Edam was concerned, and he pleaded for her to choose wisely. Now was not the time to anger Umak. Instead, she had to find a way to pacify him.

Aive swallowed and then began to speak slowly, carefully. “It gave me the opportunity to reflect on how foolishly I behaved. The time in my hut has made me wiser, Umak.” She continued to hold his stare, and he narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“Your words are sincere, but your tone is not.”

Aive still refused to look away, and she spoke again. “I am sincere, Umak. I see the wisdom in your choice to confine me. It needed to be done.” Aive quieted then and looked down demurely.

Umak backed away from the two creatures and looked at the healer. “You believe that they have changed?”

The healer took a step forward and spoke up. "I do not see how they could not be changed by the experience, Umak. Your punishment was wise." He lowered his head as a show of respect and stepped back.

Umak gave an odd sigh, one of aggravated contentment. It seemed that he was at once pleased with himself for choosing such wise punishments, but also annoyed because now there was no need to discipline them further. Edam watched Umak carefully out of the corner of his eye and wondered what he was thinking. Umak was an intelligent creature, and Edam did not doubt that he was at least somewhat suspicious about their suddenly obedient and respectful behavior. Still, it was clear by the way he was now strutting around the hut that he was proud that his punishments had at least made some kind of impact.

"Did you find this last moon cycle beneficial, Edam?" Umak stopped his prideful walking and looked at Edam as he answered.

"Yes, Umak, I did."

"Do you think my punishment was fair, Edam?"

"Yes, Umak."

"Do you want to go back to your chains, Edam?"

Edam paused before answering. "No. I don't."

"And why is that?"

"Your punishment served its purpose. I have learned much from my time in chains."

"But have you learned *enough*, Edam? Can you prove to me that you are not in need of additional punishment?"

Edam swallowed, unsure and frightened about where this conversation was headed. "I will prove myself to you. Just tell me how."

"Mmm. Edam. You are a different creature than the one who stood before me so defiantly a moon ago. But I don't trust this Edam. Yes. I shall require proof." Umak motioned to a guard, who stepped forward.

"Go collect the items we spoke of earlier."

"Yes, Umak." The guard bowed obediently and quickly went from the hut.

Umak began walking circles around Edam and Aive, who both stood stiffly and refrained from making any noise or movement.

For several long moments, the only noise inside the dwelling was the filtered sound from the unity square. No one spoke and no one moved, except for Umak. As he walked, he began trailing the Marking Stick behind him, so that it clattered and jumped along the wooden floor boards. Edam cringed slightly, but stopped himself before it became a visible reaction.

At last, steps were heard at the doorway, and there were a few low, muffled words exchanged with the guards posted outside. Umak stopped pacing and turned toward the door, a slight smile spreading across his lips.

"Now we shall have our proof."

The door opened, and the guard stood before them, carrying two burlap bags. They were bulging, and it was clear that they were heavy because the guard strained with the effort of carrying them to Umak.

When he stood before Umak, the guard dropped the bags on the floor with a thud.

“As you requested, Umak.” Again, a courteous nod and then the guard went back to his post on the inside of the doorway, looking slightly out of breath.

Umak looked giddy as he bent down and untied the leather strips that were keeping the bags closed. As Umak reached his hands inside the first bag, Edam began to feel his muscles tighten with the act of waiting.

Umak moved his hands around inside the burlap, sifting through the bag’s contents, searching for the item he wanted to reveal first. Finally, he grasped what he was after and drew it slowly from the bag. Edam recognized it immediately. It was perhaps his most cherished possession—the carved reed pipe that had been displayed on his mantle since one of his earliest treks with the Marking Clan. It had been given to him by Hakuma, a fellow Marked One, obtained on one of the trips that the Clan had made to his unity. This particular pipe was fairly simple, compared to the others he had been given, but its simplicity was what made it all the more special. The other pipes, and most of the other items he had received, all had been done by unity artisans. But this pipe had been carved by Hakuma himself. The two had met not long after Edam’s first marking, and Edam was eager to meet others like himself, to try and make sense out of the path he had been told to live.

Hakuma was old when they had met, and had long since been completely covered. It was obvious to all how revered Hakuma was to the unity he served. When Edam and Hakuma had strolled through the unity square, other creatures often came up to Hakuma and offered him some kind of token—a piece of fruit, a wedge of cheese, a carving. Hakuma took each of these things in turn, graciously,

and offered kind words to all the creatures they encountered. Edam remembered how he had felt standing next to Hakuma; he had been in awe, and he wondered above all else if he would ever be as noble as the creature standing next to him.

At one point, Hakuma led Edam back to his dwelling and the two talked at length about many things. How to ease the pain of fresh markings. How to prevent infection from taking hold. How to clear away the bits of charred skin that invariably made their way into the markings themselves. He shared the secrets of his very existence with an eager Edam, and Edam in return offered him stories of his experiences with the Marking Clan thus far. As the sun was going down, and it grew close to the time for the feast, Hakuma pulled out a thick reed and a blade. Quickly, he began carving; soon a pile of shavings covered his boots. Edam sat and watched him work, amazed by the dexterity that the old fingers still possessed. Finally, Hakuma handed Edam the pipe, pointing out the carvings he had made.

First, he indicated the intricate design of interlocking circles. *To show that you are one of many.*

Next, Hakuma pointed to a series of dots, surrounded by a pattern of woven lines. *To show that each marking begins with one speck, but that those specks will join into a mark of honor.* And finally, the old creature slid his finger down the pipe to the final carving. It was something that Edam could not make out, and he looked at Hakuma curiously. *An empty bowl, Edam. A reminder to never be satisfied, and to never stop doing your best to fill it.*

Now, Umak held the pipe in his hands, turning it over and over, but keeping his eyes on Edam the entire time, gauging the Marked One's reaction. Edam reminded himself to breathe slowly, and to keep the anger and worry from his face. When Umak offered the pipe to Edam, Edam was surprised. His first instinct was to reach out and snatch the pipe from Umak's hands. Instead, he paused for a bit and then casually took the pipe from Umak.

Uncertain of what Umak's intentions were, Edam glanced down at the pipe, then looked up at Umak with a questioning expression.

"You are fond of that pipe, are you not?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, then. This should be the perfect test for you. Destroy it."

Edam was not certain that he had heard Umak correctly, and he was desperately hoping that his ears had indeed made a mistake. "Destroy it?"

Umak gestured toward the fire pit behind him. "Burn it."

"Why would you have me do such a thing?" There was no anger in Edam's voice; it was a plea for understanding.

"That pipe means something to you. And I have asked you to destroy it. Which means more to you? That pipe, or this unity? The choice is yours to make."

"And if the pipe doesn't burn?"

"You are refusing to destroy it? I would have thought that your time in chains would have made you more obedient."

“I am not refusing...I just want to know completely what it is you are asking of me.”

A look of annoyance spread across Umak's face. “I am asking you to burn this pipe, Edam. It is not difficult to understand. And if you refuse, I shall be forced to consider alternative punishments.” Umak crossed his arms in front of his torso. “We are waiting. Burn it—and prove your loyalty to me—or refuse and face the consequences. Choose!”

Edam looked quickly at the healer and at Aive. Both offered Edam expressions of sympathy; it was all they could do for him. Edam then looked down at the pipe in his hands. *What would Hakuma have done?* Hakuma, of course, never would have been in this situation in the first place, Edam reasoned. He was a strong Marked One, but he was not foolish as Edam had been. Hakuma had been obedient. Edam realized that he had to burn the pipe; there was no other choice for him to make. Taking a step forward, Edam reluctantly approached the fire. With a deep breath, he placed Hakuma's pipe amongst the glowing embers and watched as flames rose up in response.

Umak stepped forward so that he was shoulder-to-shoulder with the Marked One. “You have burned the pipe. Your most precious possession.”

Edam straightened, proud of himself for being strong. “Yes, I have. To show my loyalty to Arkhe.”

Umak slowly turned to face Edam, eyes narrowed, and a smile gradually appeared on his face. “Then you are a bigger fool than I thought you to be.”

“I don’t understand! I did what you asked! I burned the pipe.” Edam felt fury and panic rising within him, and his body was shaking now with confusion.

“And you, Edam, chose to prove to me that you are a spineless Marked One, willing to turn your back on those things that mean the most to you in this world. All to prove your loyalty.” Umak turned to address the healer, the guards, and Aive—all of whom were standing silent, puzzled and reeling by the emotional display. “He has shown me that loyalty is something that can be abandoned when it is convenient. That loyalty is something that can be fleeting when necessary to save one’s skin. By burning that pipe, Edam has shown me how vile he really is. He is weak. He is a disgrace to me.” He pointed to the door. “Guards—leave us.” They hesitated at the command, and then Umak rushed over to the door and angrily flung it open. “Get out!” The guards looked at each other quickly, then scurried out the door like frightened mice. Even the guards outside the door were instructed to leave, as was Umak’s helper.

In that moment when Umak’s back was turned, Edam suddenly lunged toward the fire, desperate to save the pipe. Umak saw the movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to watch as Edam grabbed for a long iron poker and reached the tip of it toward the flaming reed. One end had not yet been destroyed, and Edam was trying frantically to rescue it before it turned to ash. Umak walked over to Edam and watched as the Marked One struggled to undo what had already been done. “Look at you! Look at the fool work! Do you not know the power of fire? Do you not know that fire destroys those things that we feed it?” He watched as portions of the reed dissolved into bits of glowing embers, and he chuckled

angrily as Edam only succeeded in catching the last bit of the pipe on fire instead of drawing it safely from the glowing coals.

Edam at last sat back on his heels and watched the fire persistently lick away at the pipe he had cherished. He dropped the poker with a disgusted thud, and the sound echoed for a moment off the walls of the hut. Only when there was silence did Umak step forward, with anger fully unleashed. Roughly, he grabbed Edam by the elbow and pulled him to his feet. Edam stumbled, trying to find his balance. But when Edam at last was able to stand without wavering, Umak slapped him hard across the cheek with the back of his hand. Edam reeled at the force, and his eyes blinked rapidly, trying to clear the tears that had appeared.

Aive stepped forward in alarm and shouted, "Don't harm him!"

Umak ignored Aive's plea and gave Edam his full attention. "You fool! You need a female to come to your rescue?" Umak laughed and threw an angry fist deep into the inflamed, painful flesh just below Edam's ribcage. It was a hard, snapping *thwomp* that left Edam doubled over with pain. But Umak refused to let Edam rest. "Stand up, Edam! Stand up, you coward!" He grabbed Edam by the collar of his robes and shoved him hard against the wall. Umak's right hand stayed on Edam's neck, and the fingers were like talons across his throat. "Now you hear this. You have been told before, but you have refused to listen. Your life does not belong to you. Your life is lived for Arkhe. Your days and your nights are spent serving Arkhe. Serving me. You have refused to respect me, you have refused to take your role seriously. That has been a mistake, Edam." Umak tightened his hold on Edam's throat.

His fingers clenched down hard, digging into the marked flesh. Edam clawed at the hand that was preventing him from taking a breath. His face was turning red, deep red, and he tried desperately to push the elder away, to hit him, to pry away the hand of the relentless Umak. Gurgling sounds came from Edam's throat, and Umak only clenched harder in response.

The healer stepped forward. "Release him, Umak!"

"This does not concern you, Healer!" Umak grunted with the effort of speech, but his anger was evident nonetheless. "This is between Edam and me."

But the healer would not be stopped. "He's going to cease being, Umak!" He stepped forward and began prying Umak's fingers off of Edam's throat. "Do you want to be responsible for that? This is no way to settle things, Umak. This is no way to lead!"

"How dare you defy me! Does my word mean nothing to you?" Umak was livid. He doubled his efforts, and blood began to ooze out from between his fingers. Edam continued to struggle against Umak, but his movements were growing slower, and his eyes had begun to close. The healer worked more quickly and tried even harder to free Edam. But Umak held tight and continued to maintain his grip on Edam's throat. Edam's eyes began rolling back in his head, then closed altogether.

Aive dashed forward and began pummeling Umak's back and sides with her clenched fists, shrieking, "Let him go! Let go of him!" Umak tried to hit her with his free hand, but his position allowed her to easily avoid his fist.

Finally, Umak got so annoyed that he gave Edam's neck one last hard squeeze and then pushed him across the room, where he landed in a heap at the base of the table. Immediately, the healer went to him, kneeling as quickly as his stiff knees would allow.

Umak turned his full attention to Aive. He now had two hands free, and he grabbed for Aive's braid. "Another fool!" He wrapped the hair around and around his hand so that she could not move. She struggled against him, but he forced her to her knees. He also knelt and reached for the poker that Edam had dropped. He jammed it into the fire and nestled it among the embers. Aive screamed and flailed wildly, hitting at Umak's arms and face with her fists. Umak, by way of response, yanked her head back with a jerk of his hand and reached for the poker. The iron tip glowed red and he inched it toward the soft skin on Aive's throat. "How would you like a mark of your own?" She whimpered and tried valiantly to free herself from Umak's hold. She reached up to his face and scratched, but only succeeded in having the poker rush to her skin, sizzling on contact. Aive cried out with the intense pain. Sobbing, her hands tried to push the poker away, but the metal was hot and she burned her palms. Umak pulled the poker from her skin, leaving a steaming, red-black mark on her throat. Umak moved the poker up, until the tip was nearly touching her cheek. She cried even harder now and begged him to stop. Umak smiled and pulled the poker away, but only so he could again heat it in the fire. He turned his attention to the flames. Aive struggled against him more than ever, still crying out for him to let her go. But from where she was sitting, she could see the healer across the room slowly standing up. He walked

gingerly to the woodpile and selected a log. Umak paid no attention to the healer—he was focused only on turning the poker over and over, on watching as the metal began to turn bright red from the tip to about halfway up the handle.

At last, Umak removed the poker slightly from the fire, muttering, “Perfect.” He lifted the poker from the fire and began to turn back to Aive when the healer brought the log down hard over the top of his head. Umak noisily let out a breath, then fell forward; dropping the poker with a clatter onto the flat stones of the hearth. Aive had been pushed forward with the force of Umak falling, and she stayed there, sobbing. The healer knelt in front of her and quickly unwound her hair from around the elder’s hand. When she was free, the healer put his hand on her back to comfort her.

“Aive, I’m so sorry, but Edam needs me more.”

He scrambled back over to Edam and continued to treat him. Edam was now barely conscious. He struggled for air, but largely failed.

The healer called out to Aive, “You must bring me water. And a wet rag. Quickly! Then you must go for my bag.” When she did not move, he called out urgently, “Aive! He will cease being if you don’t do this! You must go!”

Aive looked up and was startled by the scene in front of her. Immediately, she stood, her own injuries forgotten. She fled the dwelling, leaving the door open behind her.

The healer turned back to Edam and took his face in his hands. “Breathe slowly, Edam. You must breathe slowly.”

The healer grabbed Edam under the arms and braced him up, then set him gently against the wall. Edam was still gasping for breath, and tears streamed down his face with the effort of survival. His chest heaved and his shoulders bobbed up and down with the struggle. He shook his head at the healer frantically, indicating that he still wasn't getting the air he needed. He began to shiver violently, from fear and shock. Edam's throat was smeared with blood, and the flesh had begun to swell. Great purple bruises had begun to appear where Umak's fingers had been. "Easy, Edam, easy. Don't panic. Try and take small breaths."

The healer continued to hold him, bracing him with his own body and with his left arm. But with his right hand, he reached for a blanket and quickly covered Edam's shoulders with it. Footfalls could be heard from the outside, approaching, fast approaching, then finally falling hard on the wooden planks in the floor. Aive fell to her knees beside the two male creatures, breathless and sobbing. She thrust a cool, dripping rag at the healer. He took it from her without a word and wrapped the cloth around Edam's throat. Edam jumped when the cold fabric made contact with his skin.

"What happened, Healer? What happened to him?" Aive was shaking now, and the bowl of water she was holding began to spill out over the side.

The healer noticed this and took it from her, setting it on the ground beside him. But he did not yet reply to Aive's questions. Instead, he ordered her to go for the bag. "It's at my dwelling, on the table. Hurry, Aive." She stood again and was gone without a word.

Even though he knew that it would cause Edam pain, the healer gently pulled Edam's head back a bit, so that he was looking toward the ceiling. Edam could spare no breath for crying out, but he fought it with what energy he had left in him. "I'm sorry, Edam, I know it hurts. But you have to keep still. I'm trying to help you breathe." Edam stopped struggling, and the healer opened wide the mouth that was still trying to suck in air.

The healer scooped up some water with his and dribbled it down Edam's swollen throat. Edam coughed and gagged a bit at the liquid, but the healer forced more of the cool water down his throat. Edam was growing somewhat calmer, but he was still gasping for air. The neck continued to swell, and the healer rewet the cloth with fresh, cool water. "Don't give up, Edam. Give the water a chance to work."

At last, Aive arrived back, bag in tow. She knelt and set it down at the healer's side. He motioned for Aive to hold the cloth at Edam's throat, then he rummaged around in his bag, pulling vials and pouches out and dropping them on the floor in haste. Finally, he held up a worn leather pouch that was the size of his hand. He tugged at the drawstring and pulled out a thick length of licorice root. He held it out to Aive, who took it, and told her, "Pull off pieces of this and put them into pipe—there, on the table—light it, and bring it to me. You must work quickly, Aive."

Aive scrambled to get up, pulling bits of the root off as she did so. She stumbled over to the mantle and shoved the tiny pieces of the root inside of Umak's pipe. The root was hard to tear, and she searched the hearth frantically for

something sharp. Finally, she saw the blade of a cooking knife and sliced off small strips of the root until the bowl of the pipe was rounded with the licorice. She held it up so the healer could approve her work, and when he did, she walked quickly to a candle and lit the strips of the root. It began to smoke, and the healer noticed this. "Good! Bring it to me, Aive." Then he noticed the open door and told her to close it. "We must keep the smoke in."

Aive handed the pipe over to the healer and stood back, a mixture of panic and curiosity filling her and causing her to tremble. She watched as the healer held the pipe up to Edam's face, and saw him gently blow the licorice smoke toward Edam's open mouth. Edam gulped at the fragrant cloud, trying to take as much in as he could. But the healer shook his head and offered Edam some instruction. "Hold the smoke for as long as you can. Breathe it in as deeply as you are able to. That will do the most good."

Edam tried to nod and did as he was told. Gradually, his face and demeanor relaxed, revealing his relief at being able to breathe easier. Every so often, Edam would cough, and then hold his neck, cringing at the obvious pain. The healer turned again to his bag, crushed some leaves with mortar and pestle, and made a paste with some water. When it was mixed, the healer dipped his fingers in; they came out covered with a clear substance that was thick and tinged with flecks of red. The healer removed the rag from around Edam's neck and applied the paste. Edam cringed, and managed to croak out, "It burns!"

Nodding, the healer replied, "Yes, it will. But it will help with the pain. And it should help to take the swelling down, too." He continued to apply it as Aive sank to her knees next to him, intrigued.

She leaned forward, inspecting the remaining paste in the mortar. "What is it?"

"Cayenne pepper, ginger, rose hips. The cayenne is what stings, but that's what will help the pain."

The healer seemed more eager to talk, now that Edam was clearly doing better, but a quick glance behind him again brought worry to his face. "Umak—Aive, I need you to check on him. He hasn't moved."

Aive stood and walked over to Umak, who was lying crumpled in a heap on his side. She leaned down and stretched out her hand, but pulled it back again. After what he had done to her—and knowing what he had been about to do—the thought of touching him filled her with fear. She felt sick.

The healer glanced over at them, to check on Aive. He sighed, seeing her expression. "Touch his neck, see if you can feel his heartbeat. Then see if there is blood on the floor."

"I don't think I can do it."

"He won't hurt you again, Aive. I promise you."

Aive knelt and cautiously, reluctantly pressed her fingers to Umak's neck, just below his left ear. She moved her fingers around a bit, then sat back on her heels. "I feel something there, and I don't see blood. But he doesn't seem to be showing signs of waking up."

The healer nodded at the news, continued to apply the salve, and then offered his response, "Then perhaps there will be enough time."

Edam began to breathe easier after the paste was applied, but he was still troubled by pain. When Aive asked the healer about Edam's injury, the healer could only shake his head and say, "I don't know exactly what damage Umak did, but I do know that it could have been worse. It could have cost him his life." Edam seemed shaken, but relieved that the worst seemed to be over.

When Edam was calmer, he was able to focus on Aive and the healer. His eyes grew wide at the sight of the large burn on Aive's skin. Tears appeared in his eyes. He reached his hand out and gestured to the bright red wound. "Aive? What happened?"

Aive was slow to respond. Finally, she turned to look to the hearth. "He burned me with the poker." But then she turned again, this time to look at the healer. "Thank you, Healer."

The healer shook his head and offered her a kind smile. "No thanks are necessary, Aive. Besides, you were strong when I needed you to be. I could not have helped Edam without you." He glanced down at her burn and frowned. "Turn around and face me." She shifted and he reached for his bag and pulled out a small jar. He pulled out the stopper. "Some aloe and comfrey will take out the heat." With gentle fingers, the healer smoothed the cool liquid across Aive's throat, then dabbed some on her palms and wrapped the wounds with clean linen. "Better?"

She nodded. "Yes, it helped the sting."

"Good, very good." He handed the jar to her, warmly patted her hands with his, and told her to keep applying it. "You were brave today, Aive. Strong." He leaned forward and squeezed her upper arm.

Turning to Edam, he asked, "And how are you feeling, Edam? Are you breathing easier?"

Edam began to nod, but stopped and winced. "The breathing is a lot easier, but it still hurts." He looked at them for a long moment. "I owe my life to you both." His eyes strayed to Umak, still sprawled out on the floor. "I still can't believe what he did. He's never thought me worthy, but I never thought that he would do what he did." His voice was raspy and hoarse, and now, full of emotion. He looked at the healer, eyes bright. "He's the one, isn't he? He's the one who asked to be marked."

Aive looked at Edam, then at the healer. "What does he mean? 'Asked to be marked'?"

The healer did not respond to Aive's question right away. Instead, he turned to look at Umak. "You know, when I first became, he was one of the first to welcome me. Time has changed him."

The creatures looked over at Umak sprawled on the floor. When Aive asked what they should do, the healer handed her a pouch of herbs and instructed her to make a strong tea from them. While it was steeping, he went over to Umak to inspect the wound. Still, Umak did not rouse.

Aive brought a cup of the tea to the healer and asked, "Perhaps smelling salts? Those would help him to wake."

But the healer merely took the tea and shook his head. "They might help, but right now, it would be safer for all of us if he stayed asleep. He might not ever wake up, after what I did to him." The healer opened his mouth to say more, but the words would not come. The healer wore guilt like an iron cloak.

Aive looked the healer in the eye. "It had to be done. Edam owes you his life. *I owe you my life.*"

"But I am supposed to heal creatures. To help them recover after illness or injury. I am not supposed to harm. That is our purpose—to never harm."

Edam stood, wobbling a bit at the exertion. "But you are more than a healer. You are Second." Edam's words came as broken whispers, and he coughed after speaking them.

The healer looked up at Edam, then at Aive, and offered a melancholy shrug. "We'd better get him over to his bed, then get some of this tea in him." He set the mug down on the table and knelt down to grasp Umak's shoulders. Aive and Edam bent, too, and each grabbed around the waist. "Gently, now, you must be gentle with him. He's been hurt, and I don't know how bad it is. We don't want to make it any worse if we can help it."

But it soon became apparent that three of them trying to carry Umak was much too awkward, and none of them could get a good enough grip to make the short trip to the bed very smooth. Edam stopped walking, and the others followed suit. "I'll carry him."

“But your neck, Edam...” Aive’s voice trailed off as Edam lifted Umak into his arms, much as he had done for the previous elder on the way to the prepared tree.

When they got to the bed, Aive pulled back the covers and Edam gingerly set Umak on the bed. The healer removed the dress robe that Umak had on, removed something from one of the pockets, and again inspected the back of Umak’s head. It was bruised, but it was not bleeding. And when he felt the bones of the skull, he did not feel any obvious breaks. “We’ll have to wait and see how bad it is. We’ll just have to wait.”

The healer propped Umak’s head up on three pillows, then began dribbling tea into Umak’s mouth. When the mug was empty, the healer set it on the bedside table and ushered Edam and Aive out of the hut with a flurry. When the door of the elder’s hut was securely closed, and the three were on the empty outskirts of the unity square, the healer turned to both Edam and Aive and spoke to them in hushed tones. “Go. Pack what you can carry. Get some food together, some extra robes. At nightfall, we will meet at my hut.” He began to walk away, but Aive grabbed his arm.

“Healer?” Her voice was full of questions. Uncertainty. Fear.

The healer looked at them with great sadness in his eyes. “You think that you both can stay in Arkhe? Umak was full of rage, and when he wakes up, his rage will be even greater, I am certain of it. To stay here means a life of misery, a life where every word you speak and every action you make is a test.”

“Wait! You’re saying that you want us to leave?” Aive’s lower lip began to tremble slightly.

“No. But I do want you to live. And here, your lives would not be your own. The decision is yours, of course, but I beg of you to choose wisely. But know this: Of all the creatures in Arkhe, you two are the ones who feel they are meant to do more. Aive, you left here in search of something that Arkhe cannot offer you. And Edam, you have given your body to the unity. You are revered. Yet you are not content with the life that has been chosen for you. The others...they see the gates of Arkhe as security, something to protect them from what exists outside of our lands. Their work is their identity, their purpose. But you both—I venture to say that you see the gates as a barrier, preventing you from experiencing the world that lies beyond our borders. They are reminders of all the things that could be.” He looked Edam in the eye, then held Aive’s gaze. “Am I right?”

Neither Aive nor Edam answered; they didn’t have to. All three of them knew that the healer had spoken the truth.

“If you both decide to do this, it must be soon. It must be tonight. There’s no time for you to wait.”

There were footsteps nearby, and a small group of laundry workers walked by with armloads of blankets and robes ready to be hung to dry. The group seemed surprised to come across the healer, Aive, and Edam, and they slowed, curious. The healer gave them the elder’s greeting, and the group respectfully

moved along. But the interruption made the healer even more agitated. "We can't talk here. Go now. We will meet at moonrise."

After she had packed, Aive finally laid down to rest. But it was a restless slumber, and Aive got up to check her travel satchel four times to make sure that she had everything she might need for the journey. *Her journey*. The realization finally came to her about dusk that she would not be coming back to Arkhe; all that she truly valued must travel with her. Of course, the remaining items she had taken from Orda's were already packed—the dagger, some rope, and a few of the leftover herbs. The blue vial was also going to make the journey; it had not left her neck. She looked over the sparse decorations on the walls of her hut; at the shelves that were lined with a variety of cups, plates, and bottles; at the hearth and her tools for cooking. She grabbed another bag and packed her small cast-iron pot, a thick wooden spoon, and a few small packets of salt and other seasonings. From her shelves, she selected nothing except for her water skins and a small bottle of seeds; these she had carefully gathered at the last harvest—if they settled somewhere, she could try and use them to grow food. Finally, she gathered an extra robe, the boots that Orda had made, and her thick cloak. It was all she really had to add to the journey, was and she hoped it would be enough. Already, her satchel was full and a burlap bag held the overflow. Aive knew that if they brought too much along, the extra weight would slow them down. But she also knew that travel would be dangerous without the proper supplies.

Aive sat on her bed, completely packed. She knew that she needed to rest, that it could be at least a full day before she would be able to sleep, but her insides were twisted. When the sun had lowered to just above the horizon, Aive emerged from her hut. She was aware of other creatures looking at her as she went about her evening routine—gathering water, visiting the kitchens for supplies (no one seemed to notice that she took more food than usual), and stopping by the unity wood pile to select a few logs for that night's fire. When she at last made it back to her hut, she closed the door with relief. It flooded through her, invigorating and sweet. She had felt out of place, walking along the unity square—exposed somehow, as if by merely looking at her, the other creatures would know of the plan and her role in Umak's coming betrayal. But there was power within her, power that had grown stronger from the knowledge alone that she was shaping her path, instead of simply walking down the one that someone else had told her to travel.

Aive spent the rest of the evening baking loaves of bread and frying sausages. These she wrapped in thick cloth and set on top of the food items already in the burlap bag—cheese and dried meat, some fruit, and grease. Hopefully Edam would do the same, and she suspected that the healer would provide them with some food and supplies, too; barring anything unforeseen, she reasoned, they should have more than enough to make it to Orda's cave.

Edam kept looking out the window of his hut, willing the sun to descend. He did not like waiting; even with all of the journeys he had taken with the

Marking Clan, the hardest part had always been the anticipation—the excitement that came when they were about to embark on another journey or the surging fear that came just before the next marking ceremony. Now, Edam felt the weight of responsibility as well. He would not have others to guide him, or to protect him. Instead, he must be the one to bear the burden of keeping them safe.

He nervously glanced at his travel bag. He did not have much that would be useful; arguably, his markings were quite possibly the most valuable thing he could contribute. But he had packed a few blankets and robes; some salves that he had been given to ease the pain of his markings—he thought that perhaps they would be useful in case of injury; and some flour, jerky, cheese, and potatoes. And, when he went through his belongings a final time, he decided to bring along a hunting knife and a bag full of baubles that he had collected throughout his travels. If nothing else, these could be traded for supplies.

For the remainder of the day, Edam paced around his hut. He ventured outside a few times, trying to appear as if everything was completely normal. Everywhere he went, other creatures came up to him and wished him well, expressing their relief that he had been freed from his chains. The attention made Edam uncomfortable—there was too much weighing on his mind for him to be particularly social, but he strived to appear as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Eventually, he made it back to the hut, but his mind was tired. He tried to nap, and did so fitfully; rising from bed was a relief. Finally, when the sun began to slip to the bottom of the sky, Edam gathered his bags and stood at the window, waiting for the moon to rise.

She quietly knocked on the healer's door, glancing from side-to-side to make sure that no one saw her. A shadow caught her attention, but with a sigh of relief she realized that it was only an approaching Edam. When the healer opened the door, he ushered them inside, motioning for them to set their travel bags down and join him at the table. Two bundles were already tied up with thin strands of leather. He pointed at them in turn, listing the contents quickly. "Smoked fish, biscuits, sugar, salt, onions, and carrots in there, along with some packets of tea and ginger. Some clean linen to use for bandages, soap cakes, leather strips, and some fresh water bladders in here." He gestured to the final bundle, the one he was currently filling. He cleared his throat, then said, "Now this one has items for the creature. A bottle of gruel mixed with goat's milk, which is the only thing I can get her to eat; a soft blanket, and some strips of linen—wind them around her waist and thighs to keep her from soiling herself. And use this aloe soap to wash her—the patchouli cakes irritated her skin." He tucked in the last of the small jars of aloe and tied up the bundle with the remaining leather strips. When he was done, he placed all three bundles in a large satchel and secured the clasp. He avoided looking up.

There was silence from Edam and Aive; they looked to each other, both wordlessly asking the same question: *The creature?*

Edam moved forward, cautiously. His voice was stronger now, but was still barely above a whisper. "What are you talking about, Healer? Why are you packing things for another creature?"

“This is the perfect opportunity, Edam. It seems fated.”

“*What* seems fated?” The events of the day had left Edam exhausted, and this piece of news did little to improve his mood.

“That becoming was unlike anything that has come before it. The creature who became is not like us. Her behavior, her appearance, her size...she has baffled me. And I thought that perhaps...” He paused. “I have kept her from harm the best I’ve been able to. But Umak’s patience grows thin. She is in danger here. If she stays in Arkhe, I fear the worst. She must be protected.”

Aive reached up and felt for the vial, and she looked back and forth between the two creatures in front of her. The words did not seem to make sense, and her expression was one of clear shock. “What are you talking about?”

“The latest becoming. The creature who became is in danger. She is unlike any creature that I have ever laid eyes on before. She is like something from a fever dream. Umak fears her. He believes that her size, and the fact that she cannot speak, cannot walk—well, he believes that these are signs she is wicked.”

The healer was interrupted when Edam quickly stepped back and looked at Aive. “He wants us to take her away from here.” He slammed the table with his hand. “We’ve been set up! You crafted this entire day to get us to save this creature!”

The healer’s face was pinched with desperation. “It was no set up, Edam. I did not know what Umak would do to test you. I did not know that he would lash out as he did. This day has taken me by surprise as much as it has you. Believe

that. Both of you. But you have to leave Arkhe now; we all know that. And if you leave, you can take the creature..."

Edam stood, visibly shaken. "It *is* something wicked! I understand why Umak wrestles with this becoming! It should be destroyed. It is a danger to all."

The healer was quiet, but finally he shook his head and offered Edam more in the way of explanation. "I don't believe it is a danger. It is something that I do not understand, most definitely. But this creature—I believe it to be female—poses no threat. I am certain of it. But your reaction was the same as Umak's. He, too, wanted her destroyed. He feels she is a mark of shame on Arkhe, and he wanted to throw her to the flames to be rid of her."

"For once I agree with Umak! It is not like us, and there is reason to fear it."

"Edam, I persuaded Umak that destroying her was unnecessary."

"Why not? There is something to be said for protecting Arkhe! This creature could very well destroy us if we do not rid ourselves of it first!"

"I agree that our primary concern should be keeping the creatures of Arkhe safe. But, again, I believe that this creature poses no threat to us, Edam."

"How can you be sure of that? You put us all at risk!"

The healer shook his head and stood. He went to the window and looked out at the unity square. For a long moment, he was silent. But then he again spoke, so quietly that Aive and Edam had to strain to hear his words. "She is a gift. I am certain of it. I don't know how, or what her becoming means." He turned again to face Edam and Aive. "I know that your first instinct is to fear her.

That was my first reaction as well. But time has shown me that she must be kept safe from harm.”

Edam sighed, full of confusion. “But you got your way—you said that Umak listened to you, that he wasn’t going to harm her.”

“His patience grows thin. Within days, I am sure he will take action against her.”

“Why?” Edam’s eyes narrowed, suspicious.

“She cries out many times a day and cannot be quieted. She resists the food we give her. She wakes in the middle of the night—sometimes more than once. Someone must wash her regularly, for she soils herself often. He grows annoyed with her because she cannot work, and she prevents others from doing their own tasks.”

“She is taking our time and supplies; it is time to do away with her.”

Aive gasped in surprise and came forward. “Edam, how can you say such a thing? Do you dispose of the sick? Of the old? Because they take our time and our supplies? Because they need our care?”

“That’s different, Aive—the old and the sick gave to the unity. They worked. They proved themselves worthy of such care. She has shown us nothing! We are foolish to offer her care until she proves her worth to us!”

“She will cease being long before that. She is far from being able to work. Her body must have nourishment, yet she resists everything that I offer her.”

“She is a waste of time, Healer! You are saying it yourself—she will cease being before she can offer us anything in return.”

“Edam, I ask you to stop for a moment and consider your words. Stop the flood of anger that I hear and listen to what I am trying to tell you.”

“I’ve heard you—there’s a sick creature, who can’t even take care of herself. Umak wants to rid Arkhe of her, and you convinced him—foolishly, I might add—to reconsider. See? I’ve heard every word!”

“You have heard what you have wanted to hear, Edam! There is more that I am saying but you don’t want to hear it!” The healer’s cheeks were flushed now, angry.

“Then tell me! Tell me what I’m missing.”

“She needs you both. She needs your help.”

Edam laughed, amused and agitated. “She needs us? Was this your plan all along? For us to take over her care? Ha!”

“Edam, listen to him. A creature needs help. The healer saved your life today, and he saved mine. Why won’t you listen to what he needs to tell us?”

“Edam, I promise you—there was never a plan, not until the events of earlier made it clear that this is the way things must be. You must leave Arkhe, with her. Take her from this place in search of answers. In search of some creature who can help her. Heal her.”

Edam looked over at the healer as the anger slowly began to seep out of him. “Why us? Why not you?”

“I considered going when she first became. But I am the healer. There are several here who are ill. I must stay and care for them. The creatures of Arkhe need me.”

“And a unity does not need its Marked One?” Edam looked open-mouthed at the healer, appalled and newly angry by the apparent insult.

The healer came close to Edam, clutching his robes. Edam struggled against the restraint, but the healer held firm. “You went many times to the elder-that-was. You spoke to him about your need to experience fulfillment. Edam, please. This could be your chance. *This* could be the best thing that you ever do. You and Aive have decided to leave Arkhe anyway! Why not take her with you? Why not save her life?”

The fight was finally gone from Edam’s eyes, and he stopped struggling. “But I’m marked.”

Giving Edam a small, tired smile, and releasing his hold on Edam’s robes, the healer said, “And what difference does that make? Yes, you *are* marked. But that is not all that you are. The elder-that-was knew that you had the capacity for something more. But he did not know what. I don’t know if this is the right opportunity for you or not. But it is an opportunity nonetheless.” The healer looked at Edam for a moment, then turned his attention to Aive. “You both deserve an opportunity.”

Edam began to pace, and Aive simply sank down into a chair, overwhelmed by the choice in front of her. The healer sat in the opposite chair. “Aive?”

Aive was silent a moment, and was subconsciously fingering the vial around her neck. “This is unexpected, Healer.”

“Yes, I imagine that it is. But I could say nothing about it before now. Umak wants as few creatures as possible to know about this becoming. She is a fiercely guarded secret.”

Aive shifted in her chair so that she could face the healer. “Why? Why do you feel this way? Why must she be protected?”

“She’s no threat to us, Aive. No threat to Arkhe. To anyone. She is helpless, and she needs someone to care for her; that’s true enough. But more than that, there is a feeling of...hope? Of something that I can perhaps not even name. Something precious nonetheless.”

“Can we see her?”

“That’s impossible, Aive. Umak has her under lock and key. He prefers to make it seem as if she does not exist. I can see her only when he requests me to do so, and only when he is able to accompany me. I do have a plan for getting her out, but it’s risky. You’ll have to decide without seeing her first.”

“So who cares for her now?”

“Well, he assigned Semija the duty. That was her punishment for her behavior when she was being questioned about Edam’s whereabouts. She’s kept under lock and key, as well. I’ve tended to her a few times since the becoming... exhaustion, mostly. The creature terrified her at first; that’s why Umak resorted to keeping them both in the locked room...so that she could not escape. But there is no terror now...it is an attachment of sorts.”

“Semija could go. She’s already familiar with the creature. It makes sense!” Edam had suggested this idea eagerly, and he turned to look at the healer expectantly.

But the healer just shook his head a few times. “She would never leave. She has no reason to.”

This time Aive leaned forward a bit. “And we do?”

“She is happy here.” He shrugged. Nothing more needed to be said.

Aive stood, with one question pulsing within her: Was this the work that Orda had so insisted Aive must complete? There were other things to consider, of course—she full of questions. Did she really dare leave Arkhe again? Surely her punishment would be very grave for leaving without permission twice in as many moon cycles. And what of this creature? Could the healer be wrong—*did* the creature mean them harm? But she kept thinking again and again of Orda. In her mind, she saw Orda’s face, so insistent that Aive’s work was to begin here. And right now, this seemed like the very thing Orda could have meant.

She turned to Edam. “What do you think?”

He shrugged, still confused and sore about the events of the evening. “I don’t know. I really don’t. I have to go. We have to go. I just wasn’t expecting this, too.”

“We can’t just leave her here, Edam. You heard the healer—she won’t survive if she stays here.” She paused. “It’s a chance, Edam.”

Edam turned to study Aive. “A chance for what?”

“A chance to be happy. To be fulfilled. To make the elder-that-was proud. You know that he would want you to do this. And I know someone who would want me to do this, too.”

The healer looked at both of them with the utmost reverence. “You both realize that when Umak learns that you have taken the creature—well, you can expect not to be welcomed here again, for at least as long as Umak is elder. When you leave Arkhe, it will be for good. Do not make this decision in haste. And do not agree to it for the wrong reasons. Believe in this as much as I do—more, even. Do it because you think that you have no other choice but to help her. Not because your lives lack fulfillment. If you want to agree to this for selfish reasons, you help nothing. You help no one.”

Edam walked to the window and rested his hands on the sill. He studied the unity square, lit now only by moonlight.

Aive walked up to him. “Edam, you and I are leaving Arkhe to live a better life. To find someplace safe. How can we deprive her of those same opportunities?”

Edam turned to face Aive, “I could say no to this.”

Aive lowered her head. “You could.”

“But how could I live with myself? If the healer believes in this so much, then who am I to disagree with him?” He turned to look at the healer. “You saved my life today. You risked everything to save me. Why did you do it?”

“Because you needed saving.”

“Well, I guess it sounds like she does, too. Aive, I think we have to do it.”

“Yes. We do.”

The healer rose, and put his arms around both of them. “Thank you. I know that this has been a difficult decision.”

After a quiet moment, Edam asked, “Healer, you told Aive that the creature was being kept under lock and key. So how are we going to get to her?”

“Umak keeps the key in his robes; I took it from his pocket earlier. And the room is kept in a room off of his dwelling.”

“But, Healer—what if he wakes up?” Aive’s voice was tight with worry.

“Have either of you ever heard of wood betany? Of valerian?”

Edam shook his head impatiently. “No.”

“The tea that I gave Umak—it was made from those two herbs.”

“I’m not sure what that means.”

Aive was deep in thought. She has heard something about valerian from Orda. “Is it used for sleep?”

“Yes, it is, to some degree. They both are. He was already knocked out by...by the log. But the tea will make sure he stays asleep. The valerian will slow his blood, slow his breathing. I haven’t poisoned him—the herbs will make him feel better. They’ll help the pain and swelling. But he’ll have a good sleep before he wakes up. With a little luck, the tea will give you plenty of time to get away from here.”

“With the creature.”

“Yes. With the creature.”

“But what of you? And Semija? What will you do when Umak wakes?”

Aive shook her head. “I don’t like this. Just the thought of leaving you both here...your plan puts so many at risk.”

“He will not harm Semija. She will know nothing of the plan, and the events will be as much of a surprise to her as they will be to Umak. I will make sure that she is kept safe.”

Edam stepped forward. “And your own safety? Umak may not know that you gave him the sleeping tea, but he’ll be livid when the new creature is gone. And he’ll be furious with you for hitting him. When he finds that Aive and I have left, too—I can’t imagine the anger that will fill him. He’ll suspect you, or one of the guards. He’ll know that this was deliberate, and that we did not act alone.”

The healer nodded. “Yes, there will be anger. I am certain of it.” He sighed. “And I may well face consequences. There is part of me that believes he will be relieved that the new creature is gone. And I venture to say the same reaction might occur when he finds you gone as well. But if there is fury, I will endure it. I will admit my role. I will face the consequences gladly. It is decided then.” The healer began walking to the door. “I will return with her. You’ll need to leave soon. You must be beyond Arkhe’s lands before sunrise to be safe.”

At the door, the three creatures exchanged nervous glances. There were many words that could have been said, but none was necessary. Everyone was aware of the danger of the situation, and of the extreme need for caution. Without waiting for a response, the healer opened the door and slipped out into the night.

The choice had been made and that the plan had to go forward, whatever the outcome.

Aive and Edam crept over to the window and peered out, watching as the healer cautiously made his way across the unity square. At Umak's door, he paused, listening for noises from within. After a moment, the door opened and the healer disappeared into the blackness of Umak's hut. Edam and Aive watched breathlessly, hearts pounding, eyes refusing to leave Umak's door.

For several moments, they watched the door in silence, a silence that Edam finally broke. "Something is wrong. He should have been out by now."

"Give him time, Edam. He'll do it."

"What if Umak wakes up?"

"The healer will give him a reasonable explanation. He wants this more than we do, Edam. He won't make a mistake. And Umak won't wake up. Between the injury and the tea, the healer will be safe."

"For now, maybe. But what do you think will happen to him when Umak finds us gone? You and I both know that the healer will pay a dear price for this. It could cost him his life."

Aive shook her head and replied firmly. "We can't think of that. If we do, we won't be able to leave."

"And if it means that the healer's life is in danger, maybe we shouldn't leave!"

Aive turned to look at Edam. "He knows the consequences he will face. But he believes in this creature, in this journey. And I believe in him. If you don't think you can go, then stay. I will go alone."

"I never said that I wouldn't go! I just said that the healer's life is at stake. Are we willing to risk that to save the life of a creature we have never met?"

"*He* is. This plan was his idea and we must have faith in his wisdom. He knows the choice he makes. Besides, we both know that we can't stay here. Not after today. I don't know about me, but you wouldn't survive, Edam. Umak would make sure of that." She glanced again out the window. "Here he comes!"

They hurried over to the door, and silently greeted the healer when the door opened. The healer was out of breath, and he was shaking. "Umak started calling out in his sleep when I was unlocking the door. I think he was having a fever dream. I had to check on him, and I draped his forehead with a damp rag. But it's done."

Edam chuckled hoarsely as he patted the healer on the arm. "You inspire me, Healer."

"Why?"

"You stopped to help the very creature you are willing to betray."

"Oh, but Edam. This is not about betrayal. This is about saving a life. Those two things are very different. Promise me that you'll try to understand the difference—to understand what it is that we're all doing."

"I give you my word."

“Good. You’ll be better for it.”

Aive was eager to hear more about the healer’s experience. “What of Semija, Healer? And the creature?”

“They were both asleep when I went into the room. And I had no trouble removing the creature.” With that, he raised his arms, gesturing to the bundle they cradled. No one had yet mentioned the blanket he carried, or what the blanket held. Without another word, the healer pulled back the edge of the cloth, revealing a tiny, sleeping face. Aive peered at it, eyebrows drawn together as she struggled to understand the creature in front of her. She was at once repulsed by the creature—the size of it frightened her, and it appeared helpless. Still, something inside of her stirred, as if waking from dormancy. It was the creature’s size and helplessness that indeed terrified her, yet those very qualities also made her yearn to protect it. She held out her own arms, and the healer passed the bundle to her. With a finger, she softly traced the outline of the creature’s face; the face was surprisingly like her own—the features were the same, yet much, much smaller. Aive looked at the healer in amazement. “I can’t believe what I’m holding!”

The healer looked at her and smiled knowingly. “Edam? What do you think of her?”

Edam, too, was looking in at the tiny body. It was odd for him to see Aive behaving in such a gentle way with the creature, when he himself was still wary of any potential threats. However, after seeing how small she really was, and how strongly her entire little hand was now grasping one of Aive’s fingers, he admitted that she likely posed no danger. With all of these thoughts running through his

mind, Edam could articulate none of them. He looked at the healer and shrugged, perplexed and fascinated, beyond speech.

The healer gave the three creatures a moment more to get acquainted, but soon he reminded the two that a long journey awaited them. Edam went over to the travel bags and hefted all he could carry, looping his arms through the straps to carry some on his shoulders. One he put over his head and carried across his chest, wincing when the straps dug into his tender flesh. The healer took the remaining bag and lowered it over Aive's head, so that the bag rested in the small of her back. The healer took the bundle from her as she adjusted her arms through the strap. When she was done, she again reached out for the bundle. But the healer was holding the tiny creature out in front of him. He seemed reluctant to part with her. "Why don't I carry her until we get outside?"

The healer moved to the door and tucked the creature securely in the crook of his arm. Aive followed, and Edam trailed closely behind. They left the hut, walked quickly to the edge of the woods, and stepped into the cover of the forest. Moonlight fell through the branches, casting delicate shadows.

With gentle eyes and voice, the healer began speaking softly to the sleeping creature in his arms. Choked with emotion, he at last offered her these words: "Journey well, my young friend. Farewell to you." He looked up at Aive and Edam, and offered them a similar sentiment. "Journey well, my friends. May wisdom travel with you. I hope to one day stand with you again." With one last look into the crook of his arm, he handed the creature over to Aive. "Keep her safe."

“Thank you, Healer. For this opportunity.” Edam held out his hand, and the healer took it warmly. “For all you’ve done.”

Aive reached out and patted the healer on the shoulder tenderly. “We promise to keep her safe, Healer. And she will always be told of your courage.”

The healer looked down and cleared his throat before he could respond. “I am touched that you both have agreed to take this journey. No matter what happens, I am forever thankful that you will be looking out for her.” He paused, clearly wanting to say more. In the end, all he could offer them was, “Go now, while the others sleep.” He urged them to begin walking. When they were several paces away from him, he called out softly into the night. “I, too, will remember your courage.”

Aive paused and turned back, suddenly overcome by the thought of leaving him, and Arkhe, forever. The healer had already begun walking back to the unity, and his image was blurred by the tears in Aive’s eyes. She continued walking, and the tears began to fall.

The two of them walked silently—the incline of the forest through which they were traveling left them with no extra breath for conversation. Fear kept them quiet, too—this trip had to go unnoticed by the creatures of Arkhe; they had to succeed. Their lives, and the life of the creature that Aive now cradled, depended on it. But something else prevented them from speaking as well. A startling realization had begun to dawn on Aive, and she thought perhaps the same could be said for Edam. Each of them had left Arkhe before, but always with the

knowledge that they would be returning. Now, their departure had the weight of permanence. Arkhe was no longer home.

As she walked, Aive wondered if Edam had given much thought to where they should go; he had seen many places that she had not, and perhaps he knew of a distant unity that would welcome them. But she secretly hoped that he did not have a destination in mind. If anyone would know what to make of this mysterious new creature, it would be Orda. Aive's pulse quickened at the thought of returning to the cave—and perhaps settling there. She knew in her bones that Orda might not understand what the creature was or what her presence meant, but Aive was positive that Orda would share the healer's belief that the creature should be kept safe.

When they had been traveling for about an hour, just as the party came upon the edge of Arkhe's forests, the creature began to squirm and wail.

Edam whirled around, "Keep her quiet! Someone will hear!"

Aive dropped to her knees and knelt in the grass. She pulled the bundle closer to her, patting it awkwardly.

"What does she want?" Edam was on his knees now, peering in at the tiny creature who was making such a tremendous racket.

"Maybe she's hungry? Why don't we try feeding her?"

Edam reached for the bag that the healer had packed. He pulled out the gruel and removed the cork with a hollow pop. "Here's the food he packed for her, but how do we get her to eat it?"

Aive thought for a moment, then offered a suggestion. "Take out a piece of the linen and cover the mouth of the bottle with it. Then use one of those strips of sinew to keep it in place."

Edam fumbled through the bags in the darkness and at last found the needed supplies. Working quickly, he did as Aive had said. He held the brown bottle out to her, and she took it gratefully. She turned it upside down, and watched as the linen immediately became wet with the gruel. But the linen held.

Aive shifted the creature in her arms, then lowered the bottle to her lips. For a fleeting moment the creature still cried, unsure of the contraption in front of her face. But Aive gently rubbed the wet linen against the creature's lips, and she began to suck. Eagerly, the tiny lips worked the cloth, and a look of contentment came over her. Every so often, she would offer a nearly inaudible sigh, and Aive smiled in response each time.

"Looks like it's working, Aive." Edam came closer, eager for a better view. "But how much should you give her?"

"I don't know for sure. Hopefully she'll stop when she's full." Aive stopped for a moment to adjust her hold on the bottle, then cautiously continued. "Edam, where do we go from here?"

With a sigh, Edam responded, "I wish I knew. I've been thinking about that. I've been to a lot of places, but I don't know if she would be welcomed at any of them. We might have to stay in the woods somewhere, away from any unity."

"I think I know of a place. I was there, during my time away."

“You think we should go to the temple?” Edam seemed intrigued.

Aive slowly shook her head. “No, not the temple.” The creature had fallen asleep in her arms, so Aive set the bottle of gruel down and held the creature close.

“Then where?” Edam reached over and removed the linen from the mouth of the bottle, then replaced the stopper.

During their time in confinement, Aive had told Edam a bit about her travels, basically that she had been to the temple. But she had been unable to tell him more—how the creatures of Ashtad had attacked the temple, how she wasn’t sure if Morphea had survived, how she had met Orda and taken refuge in her cave. It had all been so fresh, and the memories of those events caused her pain if she spent too much time thinking of them. But now, it seemed she had to tell Edam something, especially if she was going to get him to trust her instincts and head for the cave.

“Things happened on that journey, Edam. Bad things.”

Edam hesitated, then offered a quiet, “What things, Aive?”

She turned to look at him. Where to start? So much had happened. She felt the urge to tell Edam, but she also knew that they should get moving. “Why don’t I tell you while we walk?”

“That’s a good idea. Do you want me to carry her for a while?”

“I hate to part with her. But she’s heavier than she looks.”

So Edam helped Aive up, hefted what he could carry of the packs, and then took the small creature from her arms. She continued to sleep soundly as they started walking.

“Go on,” Edam urged gently. “I’d like to hear about your travels.”

Aive took a deep breath and began to tell her story. “Well, on my way to the temple, I came across this unity—Ashtad. And...”

“Ashtad!” Edam interrupted, “I’ve been there!”

“You have?”

“That was on one of my first trips with the Marking Clan. I’ve never forgotten it. The creatures there were so different from the creatures I knew. So angry.”

Aive nodded. “Well, that hasn’t changed.”

“Did they show you the volcano?”

“The what? They didn’t show me anything. I was only at the travelers’ lodge for a few hours.”

“Well, they took the Marking Clan deep into their woods. They brought us to the base of this gigantic hill. They called it their volcano.”

“What’s a volcano?”

Edam shook his head. “I think it was a story they were telling. But they said that sometimes, whenever that hill would get mad, the ground would begin to shake, smoke would pour from the top of it, and fire and ash would shoot into the sky!” Edam was laughing now at the very thought.

Aive laughed, too, "The hill would come alive! Why would they tell you such a thing?"

"I don't know. To scare us, maybe? To get us to leave? None of the Clan wanted to stay the night—we wound up camping out in the woods instead, so I guess their plan worked."

Aive quickly became somber. "Well, I didn't stay until morning either. I left in the middle of the night."

"Why?"

"I woke up to the elder in the unity square shouting out to all the creatures, telling them to go to the temple, to attack. When I heard that, I snuck out. I continued on to the temple so that I could warn Morphea."

"But you put yourself in danger!"

"But I had to help her. She was the reason I made the journey in the first place, Edam. I couldn't just ignore what I had heard."

"And what happened?" He reached for a water bladder and took a long drink. "Do you want some?"

Aive nodded and took several sips of water before she continued. "I got to the temple and I met this old female creature. Orda. She was Morphea's other." How could she possibly explain what Orda's role in Morphea's life had been? "She was like Morphea's helper, but she was more than that. They mattered to each other. I don't even think that I can explain it. Orda took me inside, into Morphea's private chamber."

"You were inside the temple? What was it like?"

“We were in a hurry, so I didn’t get to see as much as I would have liked. But it was beautiful, Edam. There was alabaster everywhere, polished wood tables, fountains. There was even a door with all types of wonderful inlays, and they had been placed to look like the temple itself.”

“So that’s why you were so interested in Umak’s door!”

Aive nodded, “Yes—it reminded me of the one at the temple. And all that happened there.”

“What *did* happen there?”

“Well, Morphea was very ill. Orda had been caring for her. While we were tending to her, we told her that the creatures of Ashtad were coming for her, but somehow, she already knew. We tried to get her to leave, but she refused. No matter what we said to her, she would not leave her bed. But she made Orda go, and she made me go. She said that we must continue.”

“So you just left her there alone?”

“She refused to let us stay. She kept telling us that we needed to be safe, that she was ready for whatever came next. We had to go, or we all would have been attacked. We had no choice but to leave her.” Aive paused, “Orda and I left, escaping just moments before the creatures from Ashtad arrived. We hid in the trees while they destroyed the temple grounds. We kept hearing things break and shatter. And then the Ashtad elder came out onto the platform—and told his creatures to find Morphea.” Aive’s voice caught in her throat.

“So where was she? Did they find her?”

"I don't know. I think Orda knew, but she would never tell me. But maybe Morphea found the way to safety. Maybe there was something I didn't know. Was not meant to know..."

"Well, what happened then?"

"It was night by then, and Orda led me through the forest until morning. That's when we got to her cave. And that cave is where I think we should go." Aive stopped and turned to Edam, desperation in her voice. "Oh, Edam—I don't understand what happened back in Arkhe. And I don't understand what happened at the temple. But here's what I know to be true: We would be safe there. Orda is kind and wise, and she'd help us with Child, I'm sure of it! I trust her like I trust the healer; their compassion is the same."

Edam was confused. "It sounds like Orda's cave would be a good place for us. But what's *child*?"

Aive stopped in her tracks and her eyes opened wide in surprise, "What did you say?"

"You said that Orda would help us with child, and I asked you what *child* was."

"I didn't realize that I had said that aloud. Edam—there's something more that happened at the temple. Orda was making a healing tea, and I was at Morphea's bedside. She said something to me. At the time, I thought it caused by nothing more than the fever. But now...I think maybe it was more than that."

"She had a vision?"

Aive shrugged. "I don't know for sure. But I think so. It certainly seems like one now."

Edam gestured excitedly with his free arm, the one that was not cradling the creature. "Well, what did she tell you?"

Aive paused, wanting to tell Edam the exact words that Morpheia had used. "She said '*There will be a child. It must be protected. You must be strong. You must survive.*'" Aive reached over and gently stroked the small creature's smooth cheek. "And then later, Orda made me come back to Arkhe. I didn't want to. I wanted to stay with her. But she wouldn't let me. She kept saying '*Your work begins there.*' I didn't understand it at the time, but now I do. I think this is what they meant."

Edam looked at Aive with a mix of awe and admiration. "You got your very own prophecy!" He looked down at the bundle in his arms and smiled. "Hello, Child," he whispered.

The journey to Orda's cave was grueling. Aive had not expected the trip to be so difficult, because she was eager to see Orda again and because she knew the necessary route. But she had not counted on the fact that this time, the traveling would be done in the heat of summer, not spring. The days were long and hot, and she and Edam walked most often drenched in sweat. With the weight of the travel packs and with Child to carry, they had to locate water often so that they could fill their water bladders. Sometimes, the markings on Edam's skin helped them find a

lake or a stream. But the farther away they got from Arkhe, the less useful his skin was.

The trip would have been hard enough had it been just Edam and Aive, but making the trek with Child made it much more difficult. All of the healer's warnings—about her cries in the night, her not being satisfied with the food she was offered, the soiling herself—were accurate. It was easy to grow impatient with her for crying in the night, when both Aive and Edam wanted nothing more than to sleep after a long day of walking or climbing in the Cetu valley. She would wail for hours and no amount of affection would make her stop. Sometimes feeding her the gruel would help calm her, but other times she refused the bottle and cried even harder. Eventually, Edam and Aive began to take watches in the night, so that they were each able to get some rest while the other tried to get Child to sleep. Still, despite the harsh conditions, the journey was not entirely bad.

One night, not long into the journey, Aive prepared to give Child the bottle after they had stopped and built a fire. She removed the stopper from the bottle and began to position the linen over the mouth. But in doing so, she caught a whiff of the gruel and groaned. "Oh, Edam. It's soured."

Edam looked up from the camp fire, where he was roasting potatoes. "Her gruel?"

"It's gone bad. She can't drink this anymore." She set the bottle down on the ground next to her. "What are we going to do? She has to eat!"

Edam rose from the fire and came over to her. "Well, don't worry. I brought flour, remember? We can make more gruel."

“But we won’t have the milk to add to it.”

“No, we won’t have that. But it’ll be something at least.”

Aive nodded. “Orda has pens of animals at her cave. We’ll have goat’s milk for her there.” She looked down into her arms. “You just be patient, little one. You’ll have some milk soon. I promise.”

Edam smiled at the sight and went back to the fire. He pulled out the flour from one of the bags, along with Aive’s pot. “Potatoes and gruel will be ready soon.”

Aive looked over at Edam as he poured the flour into the pan and added a bit of grease and water. She watched as his muscles worked the mixture smooth. She was glad that they were making the trip together. It would have much too difficult to make this journey alone. But more than that, Aive was just glad that Edam was with her.

While Edam finished up supper, Aive busied herself trying to keep a whimpering Child content. She looked down and spotted a flower. She admired its bright blue petals for a moment before reaching down to pluck it. She held it up, twirling it around and around in front of Child’s face. Child’s eyes were nearly as blue as the flower’s petals, and she was transfixed by the motion in front of her. She stopped crying and simply stared at the flower. Aive dangled it between her fingers and waved it through the air. “Look, Child! It’s turned into a bird!”

Edam grinned as he came over with their meal—the pot of gruel for Child and three potatoes for them to share. “Now that’s something that we’ll have to

remember: We must find a campsite with flowers nearby!" He laughed and stirred the gruel. "Is she hungry? We can try to feed her while our potatoes cool. We can't use the bottle until we clean it, but maybe we can get her to take it from the spoon."

"Maybe—let's try it. If she's hungry enough, maybe she'll take it." Aive repositioned Child in her arms so that Child faced Edam, who was sitting in front of them.

Edam took a bit of the gruel into the spoon, blew on it, and held it up to Child's lips. She tried to suck like she had on the bottle, but when her tongue found the hard wood of the spoon, she began fussing. Aive quickly held the flower up and twirled it. Again, the flower helped to calm her. Edam tried feeding her again, but stopped just as he was bringing the spoon to Child's mouth with more gruel.

"What's wrong? Why did you stop?"

"Nothing's wrong. Just keep that flower, Aive."

"It is making this feeding easier, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But it also just made her smile."

The closer the group got to the cave, the more difficult the journey became. Edam and Aive were weary; Child's care had grown more demanding. More often than not, she refused the gruel altogether, and they could not get her to take water. For hours at a time, she would cry—loud, painful cries that would force Edam and Aive to stop walking. They would take turns holding her and

rocking her in their arms, trying to calm her. They would douse a piece of linen with water to cool her skin; it was necessary, but it made Child's cries even more painful to hear. They had given up on flowers.

At last, Aive began to see landmarks that she recognized as being close to Orda's cave. She nearly wept with relief when they at last came upon the waterfall, with the hidden cave she knew to be behind the cascade of water. She led Edam along the slippery rock ledge along the falls and heard him gasp in wonder as they stepped into the dry cave. A bundle of kindling rested on the side wall, a welcomed sight. Edam busied himself with the fire and then went out to the river to see if he could catch some fish for their dinner. Most of the food that they had brought was gone—only some of the spices, a few pieces of salted fish, and some of the flour remained. But Aive was not worried; they would be arriving at Orda's the following night.

While Edam was away, Aive again tried to get a fussy Child to take some gruel or water. And again, Child refused. Aive smoothed the damp hair from Child's head and sighed, "Calm down, Child. You're making yourself all sweaty." Aive wiped the creature's head and arms with a damp piece of linen to cool her, but the whimpering continued.

In the end, Aive offered Child a knuckle to soothe her. It had taken some getting used to it—seeing a mouth with no teeth at all inside. But Aive had developed her own theory about Child, one she had yet to share with Edam. Each time she had bathed Child or had changed the soiled linens, she had been amazed by how much Child's body resembled her own. Aive had seen Child's body

change just in the half moon that they had been traveling. The plumpness in her arms had receded somewhat. The sparse spots on her head had filled in a bit with dark hair. The nails on her fingers grew. The body was *changing*—what if Child would one day grow to look like Aive and to be as big as Aive was? What if teeth would form? Perhaps she would begin to speak or walk. Perhaps, if one were to watch Child long enough, she would transform in shape and become how creatures normally were. Maybe she had simply become too early. It was startling to consider, and Aive felt foolish even entertaining the idea; Edam would certainly think her mad if she told him. She and Edam had talked of many things—his travels with the Marking Clan, her work in the garden, their sadness and disbelief at having to leave Arkhe—but she could not bring herself to share that.

Edam again entered the cave and brought Aive back to the present. She smiled when she saw him, and he held up a large fish and grinned back at her. “I have dinner, but I also have something special.” He came closer to her and pulled his other hand from out behind his back. His hand nearly overflowed with huge, ripe blackberries. “For dessert. There’s a bush right outside. We can pick some in the morning, too.” He set them down in a pile away from the heat of the fire. “We have flour to spare, maybe we can make a tart.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.” Aive set Child down on a blanket and went about making dough.

Edam stood at the mouth of the cave and gutted the fish, then brought it back and positioned it on a rock at the edge of the fire. When he was done, he

wiped his hands and went over to the blanket. "Has she eaten?" He gently stroked her cheek with his finger and smoothed her hair.

"No, she wouldn't take anything. She's barely had anything for days now. I'll be so glad to get to the cave. I'm sure that Orda will know something we can try."

"Let's hope so." Edam lifted Child into his arms and tried his luck at getting her to eat. Child sucked briefly on the gruel, but then turned her head away and started to cry. "She seems hungry. Why won't she take anything?" He tried again to offer her the bottle, urging her, "Come on, little one, take a drink for Edam." Still, she refused.

Sighing, Edam set the bottle down and stood up. He walked the length of the cave with Child, bouncing her up and down as he took each step. They walked to the mouth of the cave and he held her up. "See the waterfall, Child?" The waterfall caught her eye and she seemed captivated by the sight. "Maybe standing near the spray will cool us off. You're so warm."

Aive looked up from her position at the fire. "She cries and makes herself so hot. I just used a wet linen on her."

"Well, it didn't last." Edam paused. "Aive, it almost feels like she has a fever."

Aive stood up and came over, immediately putting her hands on Child's face and body. "She is warm! And look—her cheeks look flushed." Aive looked up at Edam. "I thought it was just from her crying. I didn't think that she was ill!"

“Well, let’s not think the worst. We’ll try and get her to take some water, and we’ll keep using the linen. I’m sure she’ll be better by morning. I think it’s all the sun and the air. Traveling is not easy, and she’s so small. It must be even harder on her.”

“You’re probably right. She’ll do better once we get settled at Orda’s.” She reached for Child’s hand and held it, stroking the back of it with her thumb. “Just one more day, Child, and then we’ll be there. We’re almost there.”

Through the night, Edam and Aive took turns sitting with Child, but by morning, she was even worse. The fever had risen in the night, and her skin was hot to the touch. But new symptoms had developed in the night, too—each breath was accompanied by a high-pitched wheeze. Every so often, she would take in a breath and then send it back out forcefully with a great, hollow cough. Child had begun the night crying, but by morning her breathing had grown so difficult that she could not spare the breath to emit anything more than sporadic, weak wails.

Edam rummaged through the travel packs while Aive held her. “The healer must have packed something in here that will help.” He began pulling out pouches and vials, often pausing to hold one up and ask Aive what she thought.

She kept shrugging, frustrated, “I don’t know Edam. I don’t know what to do for her. She’s so sick. But I’m afraid that we’d make her sicker.”

“She’s getting worse, Aive. We’ll have no choice but to do something for her soon.”

Edam's meaning was clear, and Aive felt fear grip her throat. But in the back of her mind, something tugged at her, nagged at her thoughts. Slowly, she again became aware of the substance hanging around her neck; it had become such a part of her that she often forgot that it was even there. She instantly felt her heartbeat quicken. Was now the time to use whatever was inside of the blue vial? And if not now, *when*? Orda had said she would know when the time was right, she would feel it. But all she felt now was worry. How could she be sure that whatever was in the vial wouldn't make Child even more ill? She fought back panic and reasoned with herself that when they made it to the cave, Orda would be able to tell her if the vial should be used or not. Aive's job was simple, she reasoned: Just get them to the cave. Orda would be able to help them with the rest. "We've just got to keep going, Edam. We have to get to Orda. Orda will know what to do."

"You expect to travel with her this way? We'd be better off staying here, with the fire and out of the sun."

"She's gotten worse here. She might continue getting worse if we stay. I think we should keep going, Edam. The sooner we can get to the cave, the better." Just as Edam did not know of Aive's theory about Child, he also did not know about the blue vial. Aive had kept the vial out of her stories; if he were to learn of it, he would also need to learn of the circumstances about how she had obtained the vial in the first place. And although it had happened long ago, she was not ready to share the story of how she had saved Morpheia and had been attacked

herself. It still frightened her, now perhaps more than ever before. Now, she had the added worry of Morphea's whereabouts, of Morphea's survival.

Edam covered his face with his hands for a moment and sighed with frustration. "I don't know, Aive. I don't know what to do for her." He lowered his hands and looked at her. "You really think we should go on?"

Aive nodded, "I think we have to try. We can stop along the way if we have to. But I think we have to try to get to the cave. As soon as we can."

Edam looked at her thoughtfully, reflecting the worry that Aive's face also held, then finally nodded. "Then let's get moving." He offered Aive a tired smile, then doused the fire with water and gathered their things.

By nightfall, Aive knew they were getting close to Orda's cave, and she had to fight the urge to run until she caught a glimpse of Orda. Her fatigue was great, but her worry for Child was greater. Throughout the day, Child had begun to sick, and her cough had grown deeper and more frequent. Her body was still full of fever, and her eyes were shiny with sickness. She had barely cried all day, and seemed barely able to muster the energy to whimper. For most of the day, Child had slept—the restless, uneasy sleep of illness.

Edam walked ahead of Aive along the path. He had carried most of the bags all day and was working hard to make sure that any stray branches were out of her path. After they had gotten started, he had seemed as eager as Aive was to reach the cave. She had told him to keep an eye out for the boulder, and last she heard him call back to her, "I see it."

Aive could feel tears of relief falling down her cheeks and she made no effort to wipe them away. She was so glad to have arrived, and her heart seemed to grow lighter at the prospect of seeing Orda once again. Edam had stopped to wait for her at the boulder, and he was looking down at the cave. When he heard her step up beside him he asked, "Is that it? Are we here?"

Aive looked down the hill to the cave, but it was hard to see. There was no moon, and the sky was full of clouds. And no fire lit the cave from the inside. She took a few steps forward, then broke into a run. When she reached the mouth of the cave, she cried out, sobbing for Orda to appear. But no one stepped out of the cave and no one emerged from the woods to greet them; Orda was gone.

Edam watched Aive for a moment, then dropped the bags in the dirt. Silently, he reached over and took Child from Aive's arms. Aive barely took notice, preoccupied instead by the vacant cave. She wandered into the mouth and into the gardens to search for answers. With a fresh wave of relief, Aive realized that wherever Orda had gone, she was likely to return. The goats and chickens were still in their pens. Fresh hides had been put on the rack to dry, and the garden was still neat.

"Aive?"

"It's alright, Edam. Orda isn't here now, but she'll be back. It all looks the same as when I left it; it's all just as it was."

"No, Aive, come over here! It's Child!" Panic rose in his voice and she turned to face him.

As soon as she saw that Edam was struggling to keep a hold on Child, who was now shaking violently in his arms, she ran to them, panic again rising within her. "What is it? What's happening?" Aive shouted the questions out, but she got no answer.

Instead, Edam told Aive to sit down, then he leaned over and put Child in her arms. He sat in front of Aive and helped her to hold Child. Finally, just when they both thought that the shaking would never end, it did. Child was sprawled awkwardly across Aive's lap, and her eyes were closed. Edam put his shaking hand to Child's chest. After a moment, he pulled it away.

Aive watched him, then forced out the question she dreaded asking, "Well? Is it moving?"

Edam looked up at her, tears in his eyes. "Barely. Aive, what are we going to..." But his question was interrupted by another violent jerk. This spell was shorter, but the tremors were more powerful. This time when they ended, Child was left gasping for air. With each breath, it sounded as if autumn leaves were in her chest, rustling in a steady wind. "Aive? What can we do?"

Without saying anything, Aive tugged at the rope at the neck of her robe.

"What are you doing? We have to help Child!"

"That's what I'm trying to do." With one final yank, she freed the rope holder and held the blue vial in the palm of her hand. She held the vial out to Edam without meeting his eye and asked him to remove the cork.

"What is that, Aive? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know what it is, Edam. I have no idea. All I know is if I don't try this, she'll cease being. I have to at least try."

"Try what?" Edam's voice was high, full of questions and fear. "What are you doing? Aive!"

"They gave this to me, when I was at the temple the first time. Orda told me that one day, I'd have to use it. They wouldn't tell me when that day would come, only that I would know when it did." Aive reached out and grasped Edam's hand. She held it tightly, and continued through her tears, "Edam, I wanted to wait to ask Orda what I should do, or if this was the right time, but we can't wait for her to come back. I don't know what this vial contains, or what it will do for her. But I think that we have to try it. There's nothing else that can be done."

Edam looked into Aive's eyes and then down at Child. "Do it."

"Are you sure? It could be a mistake."

Edam replied softly, "I don't think that she'll last the night, Aive. If we've got something to try, we should do it now."

Aive took a deep breath, then repositioned an unconscious Child on her lap. Hands shaking, she used the fingers of her left hand to hold Child's lips open. Then with the right hand, she carefully poured in some of the liquid.

"Now what?" Edam asked expectantly.

"Now we wait."

Edam tried to get Aive to rest that night, but she refused. Instead, she spent the long hours curled up beside Child, putting her head on the young

creature's chest, desperately needing to make sure that her tiny heart was still beating inside of her. At other times, she would pull the unresponsive Child into her arms and rock with her, stroking her hair away from her sweaty face. Aive would look out at the empty blackness and the calm, cool night. Nothing moved except the flickers of firelight shimmering on stone.

Edam also did not rest. Instead, after lighting a fire, he had gone out to milk the goats and gather what he could from the garden. When he came back in, he boiled some beans and onions for Aive, but she refused to eat more than a few small bites. At one point, Edam tried to take Child from Aive's arms, so that he could try and get her to drink some of the fresh milk, but Aive pulled away from him and began to weep.

Lowering himself to the ground, Edam sat beside her at the edge of the fire and put his arm around Aive's shoulders. He said nothing, just held her close to him until she quieted.

"She's worse?" he asked gently, his voice cracking.

"We're going to lose her, Edam." She sniffed and began to cry again.

"We don't know that for sure. We have to keep believing that she'll pull through."

Aive shook her head against his arm. "She hasn't opened her eyes since I gave her the vial. I've tried waking her up, but she won't do it. Her fever is higher than ever. She's barely breathing...."

“But she’s alive, Aive. We have to hold onto that fact. We have to believe that she can get better.” He took a deep breath. “Do you want me to go out and look for Orda?”

Aive sniffled and sat up. She looked into Edam’s eyes and replied, “But she could be anywhere, Edam. You could look for days and not find her. I wouldn’t even know where to have you start!” She shook her head and her voice grew small. “I want you to stay.”

Edam pulled her close to him and stroked her hair away from her eyes. “And I don’t want to go.”

The few remaining hours until daybreak were long and devastating. Aive and Edam took turns gently massaging Child’s hot skin with a cool piece of linen. They tried a few times to get her to take milk or water, but she was not able to keep anything on her stomach. In the end, they believed it better not to try at all than to make Child suffer even more.

Just after the sun broke across the horizon, Aive reached for Edam, who was tending to the fire, and tugged on his robe. “Edam, look!”

Edam turned around and knelt before them. Child was lying on Aive’s lap, and her eyes had opened. Her eyes were still bright with fever, but they were clear. Aive sat stroking Child’s arms and body now, tears streaming down her face. “She’s awake! Edam, she’s awake!”

Edam, too, was crying, overcome. He reached down and caressed her tiny hand with his fingers. Eagerly, she reached for him and grabbed his finger with her fist. He smiled down at her, and she smiled back.

Aive began to laugh, full of joy. "She's made it!"

But her joy was not to last. In the next moment, Child again closed her eyes. They kept expecting her to open them again, but they remained closed. After a while, her breathing grew sporadic and heavy. Then, just as the doves outside the cave began to call, Child expelled a breath and did not take another. Her small hand still clutched Edam's finger.

The heat was unbearable, and it was not even midday. Edam had been hard at work since dawn, preparing a tree for Child. He had walked slowly around the cave until he had found it—a proud cypress that was strong and tall. He had looked among Orda's tools for a blade; eventually he had found a rusty saw. With it, he had already cut nine branches, and there were still as many left to remove. The longer he worked, droplets of sweat plopped to the ground like rain, joining the tears that had been falling all morning long.

When he grew parched, Edam climbed down from his precarious perch and went to cool himself by the stream. He knelt down and plunged his bare arms into the rushing water, then brought his hands up over his head and neck. Already his skin was burning, and the water was a welcome relief. Cupping his hands, he took long sips of water until he had his fill. After dousing his head once again, he stood and went to the cave to check on Aive.

She was sitting where he had left her—where she had been when Child had ceased being. Child was still in her lap, and Aive rocked back and forth, still stroking the young creature's arms and torso.

Edam walked up to her slowly and then sat beside her. He reached over, took Aive's hand in his own, and held it. "Aive?"

She turned to look at him. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and her face was pale and ashen. Fatigue and grief were etched among the features of her face.

"Aive, the tree will be ready by sundown."

Aive nodded, but did not respond.

"You'll need to look for a length of rope. And Child's body will need to be prepared. Will you be able to do that?"

Aive nodded.

"Why don't you come outside for a while? Go and sit by the stream. It's stuffy in here, but it's cooler by the water.

When she did not reply, Edam stood and stretched. "I'd better go finish."

"Stay."

"Aive, I can't. I have to go finish preparing the tree."

"I can't do it, Edam."

Gently, Edam asked, "You can't do what, Aive?"

"The tree. I can't hang Child from the tree. Don't go back out there."

Edam crouched beside her. "That's the way it has always been done."

"But we've never had to do it for Child before."

“No, we haven’t. But the tree will honor her life.” He stood once more. “I’ll be in to check on you again in awhile.”

Edam walked out of the cave and squinted in the bright sun. As he walked to the tree he thought about what Aive had said. She was right—although he had witnessed or taken part in the tree ceremonies for many creatures, this time would be different. Not since the elder had ceased being had Edam felt this profound sadness. But the tree ceremony was the only way he knew to do what needed to be done. When he reached the tree, he looked up along the straight trunk and sighed. There were at least ten limbs remaining, and then he had to shape each stump. He had no tar available, but had heard of other unities that used clay instead. One had even been known to use dyes made from berries and flowers. He thought it best to go ahead and find some suitable material first, just in case it needed to be prepared or allowed to sit for a few hours before use. He wandered out from the tree and into the forest, searching the groundcover for anything that might work.

It wasn’t long before he came upon a stand of iris plants. He fell to his knees and began pulling up the flowers by the root. He paused before squeezing the blossom from the root and twirling the bloom sadly, thinking of Child’s first reaction to a flower. In the end, it would be fitting for a flower to play such an important role in her ceremony. When he had two large handfuls of iris roots, Edam stood, ready to go and boil them to make a batch of dye; by sundown, it would be a deep gray or black—a decent substitute for the tar he was used to seeing.

He turned and began walking back to the cave, but he stopped when he heard footsteps in the woods nearby.

“Aive? Is that you?” He waited for her response.

There was no answer, but the footsteps continued. Edam felt vulnerable there, in those unfamiliar woods, and he worried that the approaching footsteps belonged to a creature from a unity like Ashtad. He thought of Aive, alone in the cave, and quickly began walking toward her. But the footsteps also quickened and drew quite close.

“There is no reason to hurry. I mean you no harm.”

The voice made him stop and turn. There, behind him, and slightly out of breath, was Orda. He knew this as surely as he knew his own name. She was exactly as Aive had described her—short in stature, hair the color of silver threads, and a smile that was warm and kind.

“You are Edam.”

Nodding, Edam replied, “Yes, I am. And you are Orda.”

The old creature smiled. “I am.” Her eyes clouded and her expression became grim. “Let’s go to her.” She came over to Edam and looped her arm through his.

On the way back to the cave, Orda looked over at Edam and noticed what he was carrying. “Iris roots. You are making dye?”

“Yes, for the tree...” Edam wanted to continue but he did not know how. There was so much that needed to be said! But what words could he use that would tell Orda all she needed to know before entering the cave? He stopped

walking and turned to her. "Orda, a creature has ceased being, and I am preparing the tree." His voice caught in his throat and he wasn't sure that he could continue.

Orda put her hands on Edam's shoulders and looked into his eyes. "That is why I have returned. I could feel her struggle."

"It is?" He looked at her, slowly shaking his head in confusion. "So you know, then?"

"About Child?" She nodded. "Yes, I do."

Edam wasn't sure how to react. Conflicting emotions surged up within him, and he struggled to collect himself. He felt relief that she knew of Child, confusion about *how* she knew about Child, and anger—the most bitter and consuming anger he had ever known. "So why didn't you come earlier, Orda? We needed you here to help us."

"You helped each other."

"But she ceased being. You could have saved her!"

"No, Edam, I couldn't have. She was very ill. Some lives are not meant to continue."

Edam pulled away from Orda and turned from her, fuming. "You should have at least tried!"

Orda took a small step toward Edam and responded, "It was for the best that I not interfere. This was necessary, Edam."

Edam whirled around in anger. "Necessary! Aive is sitting in that cave thinking that she has failed you. You told her that her work would begin in Arkhe! But it ceases to be less than a moon after she begins caring for it? Why tell her to

do the work at all if it was meant to end in misery?" Tears came to Edam's eyes and he blinked them away in frustration.

"Edam, she has not failed. And her work did begin in Arkhe. But it has not ended here. Her work has still just begun. And you, Edam, are part of that work."

"But Child is gone!"

Orda nodded and looked at him thoughtfully. "In the winter, when the snow falls on a meadow, do the grasses disappear? Do the animals that choose to make that meadow their home go, never to return?"

"I have no time for riddles. The tree must be prepared. The dye must be made."

Edam began walking back to the cave, not caring if Orda followed him. But Orda called out after him. "The grasses survive. The animals return. The snow covers the meadow, but in the spring, it continues to grow."

Orda stood in place, not walking toward Edam and not walking away from his anger. But she watched him mull over her words until he stopped about twenty paces in front of her. Finally, he turned and looked back at her. "I don't understand." His voice was tired and small, and his lips quivered as he waited for her to respond.

Orda walked toward him and offered the only answer Edam was ready to hear: "You will, Edam. In time, you will."

She stepped forward and again looped her arm through Edam's. Together, they continued to the cave.

At the mouth of the cave, Orda lingered for a moment before going in. She watched Aive from outside, and sighed when she saw Aive sitting on the floor of the cave, cradling Child in her arms. She turned to Edam and asked, "Has she been like this long?"

"Ever since Child ceased being. Just as the sun was getting ready to come up."

Orda nodded and walked inside; Edam followed.

Aive did not look up when the creatures entered the cave, nor did she acknowledge the two sets of footsteps. Instead, she addressed only Orda.

"I brought us here so that you could help us with Child. But you weren't here." Aive looked up, with tears in her eyes. "Where were you? Why didn't you come back?"

"I have come back, Aive. I'm here now."

"But it's too late!"

"Aive, Child was very ill and there is nothing I could have done for her that you and Edam did not already do."

"I tried the blue vial! I gave it to her, but it did nothing!" She pulled the rope from around her neck and flung it across the cave. The vial bounced, but did not break.

Orda glanced back to see the vial land, and she sighed in response. Edam bent and picked it up, then placed it gently on the blanket beside Aive. Mumbling something about going to finish the tree, Edam left the cave.

Orda looked over at Aive, approached her slowly, then knelt beside her. She put a soothing hand on Aive's back and stroked in small circles. As she did so, she leaned over a bit to look at Child.

"You and Edam cared for her; she was lucky to have become so near you."

"Orda—the blue vial. Why didn't it work? You told me that it would work!"

For a moment, Orda was silent, collecting her thoughts. "The blue vial contains a very powerful substance. And you were right to use it to save another. But even though Child was very ill, the substance was never intended to be used for her."

For the first time, Aive turned and looked at Orda. "You knew that Child would become?"

Nodding, Orda replied, "Morphea had a vision. She told me long ago. And she told you."

"But I didn't know what it meant!"

"Did it matter? How would knowing have changed things?"

"I would have been prepared for her arrival! I would have cared for her from the very beginning. She would be alive now if I had known!"

"Aive, you and Edam did all you were meant to do for her."

"But she ceased being—there must have been more we could have done."

“There was nothing that could have saved her life—she was not meant to survive, Aive. That is a truth that is hard to accept, I know. But you must try to eventually.”

“So what now? We’ve left Arkhe, our home. Child has ceased being. We have nothing, Orda.”

“Oh, but Aive, that is not true! You have much more now than you ever did. You must nurture the bonds that have started to grow. And there are still things that must be done. Honor Child by remembering her and your time together. Carry memories of her into the future with you, along with the lessons that she taught you and Edam.”

“Lessons?”

“Those of patience and selflessness, generosity and devotion.”

“There is pain inside me, as if a horse has kicked me in the gut and left me sore.”

“It is grief, Aive—the pain at losing someone that you love. In time, the pain will diminish, and other joys will fill your life. But some grief will always remain.”

For a moment Aive was silent, deep in thought. “Love? Is that the name for what I felt for her? Yearning to be close to someone and caring for another more than I care for myself? Is that what causes the tears to appear now?”

“It is love that you describe. It is a gift.”

“Have you known love?”

Orda did not answer for a long moment, and Aive again asked the question. Finally, Orda turned to face the Aive, nodding slowly. "Yes, I have known love. I know it still. Just as what you feel now for Child will not leave you, that is what I have to carry with me. Remember this: love is not fleeting or temporary. It changes and transforms, but it never wholly leaves you." Orda reached down to gently stroke Child's head. "And the most difficult part of love is letting go of those that you would like to keep close."

Slowly, Aive nodded in response. "It's time to prepare her, I know. But Orda, I can't bear to suspend her from the tree. Edam has worked so hard all day to prepare for her but...I don't think I can do it."

Orda sat quietly for a moment. "It makes sense. Never has there been a creature like Child; the old ways do not fit her. We must make a new way." She thought for a moment in silence, then turned to the mouth of cave. "Aive, in Arkhe—you worked in the gardens."

Puzzled, Aive responded, "Yes, I did."

"And when you gave the seeds and bulbs over to the earth, what did you feel?"

For a moment, Aive tried to remember what it was like to turn the earth over with her hands and plant and grow. She closed her eyes remembering. She did her best to feel what she had felt then. "Hope." Her eyes opened. "I felt hope for what would come."

Orda nodded, eyes meeting Aive's at last. "Hope for the future."

Aive stared back at Orda with brows furrowed. “You want me to *plant* Child?”

“I don’t know what to call it, but I think it fitting. You and Edam cared for Child, and you would be offering her over to the earth that you love—you worked the earth; it was part of you. And Edam, well, he is Marked. The rivers and mountains and meadows are a part of him, too.”

“It goes against tradition.” Aive looked down at Child in her lap and said, “Her becoming was clouded with shame. I don’t want her final ceremony to bring more shame to her memory.”

Orda reached over and took Aive’s hand. “Her memory will become what you and Edam make of it. You will take the lessons and carry them with you on the next steps of your journey. Together, you will erase the shame. Together, you will bring hope.”

That afternoon was spent making preparations, but the tree had been forgotten. When Edam was told of Orda’s idea, he had resisted at first. Soon, however, he admitted that the idea of hoisting Child up the tree had been making him ill all morning. The planting—for they did not know what else to call it—seemed more peaceful, somehow, as if they were handing Child to the earth to be cradled for all time.

Orda asked Edam to gather tools they would need—not used to work, Edam selected anything that he thought might prove useful and gathered what he could into a large leather satchel; the rest he would carry. When he was done at

the tool hut, Edam went back to the cave to see if he could help Aive and Orda prepare Child.

Incense wafted out the mouth of the cave as Edam approached. As he walked inside, he noticed that Aive had at last moved. She was now standing with Child in her arms, and Orda walked slowly around them, carrying the incense. She looked up as Edam approached, and she motioned him forward, to come and stand next to Aive. Aive looked up and held Edam's eye as he approached, looking down at Child again only when he stood beside her. Orda continued to walk around the three creatures, and she began to hum a low melody—it was unfamiliar to Edam and Aive, but this did not surprise either of them. Although the rituals of ceasing were largely the same in all areas, each unity had their own traditions; Orda was sharing one such tradition with them.

Orda stood silently after her song was done, then she lifted Child into her arms, carried her to the cypress table, and placed her gently on a soft piece of leather. A steaming tub of water was also on the table; it had been infused with herbs and flower petals—Edam recognized lavender and patchouli, but many more types of plants floated on the surface of the water. Orda motioned for Aive and Edam to come closer, to witness the ceremony. First, Orda removed Child's simple clothing and took away the soiled linen from around her waist. Then she reached into the basin with a piece of clean linen. She squeezed out the extra water as she brought it out and then gently worked the cloth over Child's face and neck, down her torso, along her arms and legs, and over each tiny finger and toe. She rinsed the linen periodically in a pail of fresh water before returning it each

time to the basin of infused water. At last, she drew out the linen and rubbed it over Child's hair, then dried it with a fresh length of linen.

Orda mentioned to Edam to lift Child from the fur. When he raised her up into his arms, Orda washed Child's back with the linen, and again dried her. She then motioned to Aive to gather the long length of linen on the other end of the table.

"Unfold it, Aive, and drape it across your arms." Aive shook it out, then covered her arms with the cloth.

Orda lifted Child from Edam's arms and cradled her, then smoothed a dab of oil onto her forehead. She then placed Child into Aive's arms; as she did so, Aive's eyes filled with tears that began to drip slowly along the curves of her face. Edam put his arm around Aive to offer her comfort. Orda took each corner of the linen and tucked it around Child's body. Finally, when only Child's face remained exposed, she reached for an iris bloom and tucked it beneath Child's chin. The final flap of linen was pulled down to cover Child's face, and the shroud was secured with narrow strips of linen.

Orda looked at each of them in turn. "Are you ready to go to the rivers?"

Aive looked up at Edam and saw that he, too, had tears in his eyes. But he nodded at her, and offered her a small, sad smile. Aive rested her head against Edam's shoulder for a moment, then looked at Orda and said, "We're ready."

Orda led them out the mouth of the cave and through the forest where she had first met Edam. She walked slowly, with purpose, leading them to the water. When the small group arrived at the river, Edam took in the scene with

amazement. In all of his travels, he had never been to such a place. There was water rushing past right in front of them, but it quickly joined with another river, equally as powerful and wide. There were great currents where the two rivers met, as if they were each pushing the other away, fighting for one last moment of independence. The noise was nearly deafening as Orda led them to the spot where the rivers came together. The land was green and lush here, a meadow covered in young green grasses and flowers of all colors. Edam opened his bag of tools and began digging into the soft, fertile ground.

When the work was done, Edam took Child from Aive's arms and gently stroked the tiny hand through the white linen. Aive kept her hand on Child's head and bent down to kiss it repeatedly. Orda gave them a few moments with Child before she cradled the body and looked to the sky. "We have come to honor Child, with the promise that she will not be forgotten. We offer her to the earth and to the waters that surround us. We honor her becoming, and we will carry hope from here, this place of life."

Edam took Child again from Orda and bent, placing Child's body into the waiting ground. Aive began to weep, and Orda reached out to gently stroke her cheek. "She will be remembered." Aive's tears did not stop, and Orda pulled her close and stroked her hair until Aive calmed. When Aive at last pulled away from Orda, she took a small bag from her robe and opened the drawstring. From inside, she lifted out a handful of flower petals and sprinkled them over Child, brilliant reds and purples vibrant against the white linen.

Edam covered the body with dirt and Orda stepped forward, uncorked a vial of the infused water, and slowly poured it over the earth. When her vial was empty, she embraced Edam and Aive in turn. "I will return to the cave and begin our supper." With one last look to the tiny mound, she left Edam and Aive to their grief.

If a traveler had happened across Orda's cave in the moon following Child's planting, he would have witnessed nothing unusual. Orda kept things on schedule, and for summer, that meant collecting the necessary supplies for the upcoming winter. Every morning, she would walk with Edam into the woods. He would down trees and drag them to the clearing beside the cave to chop them; Orda used her mornings to collect herbs, mushrooms, berries, and fruits. There were a number of apple trees in a nearby grove, and she had been able to bring a heaping basket to the cave each morning for an entire moon. Aive milked the goats, collected the eggs, and spent the mornings cooking and making cheese.

In the afternoons, Edam would spend his time hunting and fishing or making repairs to the fence or tool hut. For Aive and Orda, the time after lunch was used to begin making food reserves—cucumbers and onions from the garden were pickled, meat and fish were smoked, and the herbs were dried and sorted into piles for teas or poultices. The apples that Orda collected were either stirred with honey and spices to make preserves or were dried. Nothing had been said about Aive and Edam staying the winter at the cave, but it was clear by Orda's

careful watch over the growing stores of supplies that she was expecting to have to feed three.

At night, when the sun had slipped down past the trees of the horizon, the three gathered in front of the fire and spoke of travels, creatures they had known, or chores that would need to be accomplished in the coming days. Most evenings, Edam entertained them with stories of places he had visited with the Marking Clan. There were subjects that were not brought up—too much talk of Arkhe stirred sadness in Edam and Aive, and Orda avoided speaking of Morphea. Aive still had questions for Orda—her main concern being what had become of Morphea when the creatures of Ashtad had attacked—but these questions were not voiced. Instead, Aive watched Orda carefully, hoping that the answer would somehow become apparent. Child was sometimes mentioned, although those conversations were difficult for Aive and Edam to have. Pain had lingered, just as Orda had said it would.

On some nights, when the sky was clear, they would go and sit by the river or at the edge of clearing in front of the cave and look up at the stars. Out there, it seemed as if words were unnecessary. The sounds of night enveloped them and they were lulled to sleep by night breezes, owls hooting in the distance, and crickets in the woods around them.

Inside the cave or out, Orda would always retire first, complaining of aching joints. After relieving herself one last time before sleep, she would walk around the fire and gently pat Edam and Aive on the head, wishing them each a good sleep. Aive and Edam would move closer to each other so as not to disturb

Orda with their talking. Other times, they would go outside and walk through the woods, or simply sit near the stream and dangle their feet in the water. Sleep was hard for both of them; their nights were a struggle between exhaustion and memory.

On the night of the planting, Aive awoke from her fitful sleep screaming and crying. Orda woke with a start at the unexpected interruption, came over to check on Aive, and had immediately put water on for chamomile tea, murmuring sleepy, soothing words the entire time. Edam, too, had been awakened, and he went over to Aive's blankets to offer her what comfort he could. He sat with his back against the wall of the cave and Aive settled herself in the crook of his arm. One arm supported her, and the opposite hand smoothed away her tears. When the tea was ready, Edam insisted that Orda return to bed; Orda's day had been a full, tiring one, and she was too tired to protest. Soft snores began almost as soon as she had nestled herself beneath the quilt.

Edam pulled his own blankets over to Aive, and he covered them both to fight the late-night chill. Aive soon quieted, but Edam made no move to go and lie down on his own cot. They sat for a long time, staring sleepily into the fire. At one point, Aive looked down at Edam's arm, which was resting on top of the blankets. Without a word, she removed her own arm from beneath the fabric and cautiously reached out. Her fingertips moved gently over his marked skin, tracing the dark lines that were illuminated by firelight. Edam felt the thin, calloused fingers exploring the markings on his hand and wrist, and his breathing

quicken. Edam was aware of a growing heat—a heat not caused by the smoldering fire in front of them. Never before had he been touched this way.

He moved his hand, and touched his fingertips to Aive's. Then, with a single finger, he began tracing the soft lines of her hand and wrist. He turned her hand over and followed the creases of her palm with his finger. He felt Aive take a deep, quick breath, then exhale slowly. Cautiously, he moved his fingers up her wrist and forearm. Gently, he moved over her long, jagged scar. He felt Aive tense, but she did not pull away. Instead, she turned to him and rested a hand on either side of his face. She searched his eyes with her own, then traced the markings on his face with her fingertips. Edam felt something stirring inside of him, and it startled him enough to reach up and gently hold Aive's wrists, preventing her from moving her hands elsewhere. She let out a soft, strange groan and Edam looked into her eyes. She closed them, then leaned forward and rested her forehead on his chest.

After a moment, she spoke, so softly he could have even imagined it. "Oh Edam, what's happening to us?"

Edam released her wrists and pulled Aive closer to him. Eventually, they slept.

In the moons following the planting, Aive and Edam did not want to leave each other's sides. They spent much time huddled in tearful embraces or comforting each other when something stirred a bittersweet memory. They walked often to visit Child's ceasing place. Sometimes they carried flowers and

placed them on the mound; other times they brought only their sadness. They marveled more than once about the power of Child's presence in their lives—how they had known her less than a moon, yet their sadness still had not diminished.

Their preparations for the upcoming winter continued as well. By mid-autumn, they had great supplies of wood, flour, jerky and salted fish, pickled vegetables, preserved berries and apples, and hides. And in the evenings, Orda had begun knitting warm woolen blankets. She told them that when the weather got colder, they would put up a thick barrier in the mouth of the cave—a thick blanket in the middle, sandwiched between airtight hides at the front and back. This would help keep the wind and frigid air out.

One day around the supper fire, Orda looked down into her stew and stirred. "We'll be harvesting straw in the coming moon."

Edam looked up from his piece of bread, shrugged, and said, "Why the long face, Orda?"

Orda looked up at them and smiled. "Not long, Edam, just a little uncertain about how to broach this subject."

Aive looked over her bowl in Orda's direction. "What subject?"

Orda cleared her throat and responded softly, "Well, you and Edam will need to give some thought to the amount of straw we'll need to harvest. Will you be making two beds, or will you be sharing a bed, as you've been sharing your blankets for some time now?"

Edam and Aive glanced quickly at one another and fought back embarrassed smiles. Somehow, they did not think that Orda was aware that each

night, after the old creature was asleep, Edam would move over to Aive's blankets and spend the night there. But all along they had known that assumption was foolish—Orda woke often in the night and was usually the first one to rise in the morning. Still, she had said nothing, and her comments now caught them both off guard.

Aive blushed and avoided looking at Edam or Orda. Instead, she was intently studying the chunks of venison in her stew. "We'll give it some thought, Orda."

Orda looked at them in turn, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. In the end, she simply nodded and returned to her meal.

Edam and Aive avoided looking at one another. Instead, Edam engaged Orda in a discussion about the chicken coop.

It was not long before the days grew shorter and the air became cold enough to make exhaled breaths visible. The three creatures worked about the cave huddled in layers of robes and furs, and all had placed new boots around their feet. The hides and blankets covered the mouth of the cave. They were sorry to lose the light, but the warmth was more than a fair trade—it was a necessity.

Although the creatures still had the daily chores of living to complete—cooking the meals, feeding the animals, fetching water and wood—the days had slowed to an easy pace. The meals took a little longer, the stories grew more detailed with each telling, and the time spent in slumber increased each time the temperatures fell. Orda had talked of making one last trip to her other caves, but

an unexpected cold snap had aggravated her stiff joints and forced her to abandon thoughts of travel until spring.

Whenever the topic of Orda's past came up, she did her best to divert the course of the conversation to something safe, like the weather or what to prepare for supper. But Edam and Aive always pressed her for more details—pestering her with questions, eager to see if this night would be the night they finally broke her. Their questions, of course, always went unanswered, at least with the truth. When she was asked a direct question that she did not want to answer, Orda would respond with her quick wit instead. Why do you travel so often and where do you go? *I go walking, to stretch my legs.* Why do you live in caves instead of in huts? *Caves are less drafty.* Have you ever lived in a unity? *I've been to unities a time or two.*

These cryptic responses left Aive and Edam itching to learn even more, but they knew enough to stop before Orda got so annoyed that she just got up from the table and left the cave. They wanted to know, but they were not willing to make her mad in order to accomplish that. Instead, they put aside their curiosities and focused on other things. And, given the events of the fall, this was not difficult to do. Thoughts still frequently turned to Child, and although the searing pain of loss had eased, a constant ache had settled in its place. Their trips to the rivers were made less frequently now because of the cold, but they honored her memory by discussing their time together and remembering all of the details they were trying so hard not to forget. The more time that passed after Child had ceased, the easier it became to speak of her.

There were long winter evenings that Aive and Edam spent talking, sometimes early into the morning. They would be snugly tucked in their bed, nestled together, and they would softly talk of earlier days, when they had lived in Arkhe. They wondered about Umak and if he had ever recovered from his head wound. Of the healer, and if he had survived Umak's rage. And they wondered too of Semija—how she would have reacted to the news of Child's ceasing. Talk of Arkhe always brought sadness; it had been their home, and now it had become nothing more than a fading memory.

There were other times when they would lie quietly together, touching and exploring. It was as if a new world had opened to them; they were fascinated and amused by how their bodies responded to the most tender of touches. There was no name for what it was they were doing. No one had ever touched in these ways before, they were certain of it. This was something of their very own, and the more it happened, the more it meant. They found that the closeness, as they had begun calling it, could help ease the pains of sadness or of loneliness. Their times of closeness brought great comfort.

It happened just after the winter solstice, when the air outside the cave was bitter and frozen; Aive fell victim to an unknown illness. One morning she woke up sick and was unable to keep food on her stomach. She complained of fatigue and headache. Orda worried that it would go into pneumonia if Aive got a chill and she demanded that Aive stay in bed until the sickness passed. Orda did her best to keep Aive fed by offering her sweet porridge and fresh snow drizzled with

honey, but she was becoming increasingly alarmed by Aive's condition. For some reason, Aive would appear to get better as night fell, and all three were hopeful that the sickness had at last improved. But by the time she woke up and began moving about the cave the next morning, her illness would return, just as powerful as it had been the day before.

Aive did her best to help around the cave, but she was often ordered back to bed by Orda, who insisted that she had taken care of the cave by herself for a great number of years and could do it again this winter. Edam, of course, helped Orda take care of things outside and when her joints were acting up, but a great deal of his time was spent in bed with Aive. He would lie beside her as she rested or slept, and Edam would intently watch the rise and fall of the blankets. He would never voice his concerns to the females, but they all knew what he was thinking; they all had the same worries. Did Aive now have what had eventually taken Child's life? It seemed too cruel to fathom—being given two wonderful gifts, only to have them snatched away by sickness.

When the fear got the best of him, Edam would go outside with the axe and began chopping down trees, despite the fact that there were gigantic stacks of wood all along the outside of the cave; covered tightly with tanned hides, they were watertight and dry. Still, he would go in search of the largest tree he could find and smash the iron blade into the solid trunk, cutting through the winter air with the steady sounds of destruction. Orda went in search of him one afternoon and she finally found him in a grove of trees halfway to the rivers. He stood before the old tree and swung the axe repeatedly, but did little damage; he was

blinded by the tears in his eyes—tears that had stirred to life as a result of the bitter cold, but had lingered because of sadness. Choking sobs escaped his throat, and he finally was forced to stop swinging when his emotions got the best of him.

Orda stood behind another large tree, watching him, then approached him when he had quieted. He was sitting on a large stone, resting his head in his gloved hands. His hat had fallen off at some point and lay on the ground. Orda crunched over the snow and picked up the hat, then sat down beside Edam on the rock. She put the hat on his head, smoothed it down, and put a soothing hand on his back.

“Edam?”

Edam knew she was there, but didn’t trust himself to respond.

Orda patted his back, and said, “It’s terribly cold out here, Edam—you should come inside before you get chilled to the bone.”

“It’s too late for that.” He looked up at Orda, eyes red-rimmed and bright. “I’m losing her, Orda.”

“Now, Edam, you don’t know that for sure. I certainly am not convinced of that.”

“She’s not getting any better, Orda.”

“No, but she isn’t getting any worse, either. And despite being ill in the mornings, she is in good spirits by supper. There is no fever. No injury. I have no idea what illness her body is fighting, but I have no reason to believe it fatal.”

“So what do we do? Let her suffer?”

Orda shrugged. "I don't know, Edam. I really don't. There is no unity within a quarter moon's walk of here. To make the trip and try to find a healer in this cold...well, I think she'd be better off staying where she's warm and dry. The cold air and wind would do nothing except make whatever she has worse."

"So we have to wait until spring? Until the thaw? So she'll be sick for four more moons at least!" Edam stood, angry. "I can't just sit and wait for spring, Orda! I have to do something to make her better."

Orda also stood, then replied, "*You* make her feel better, Edam. I have never witnessed the kind of attachment that the two of you have. There is something special between you, and that keeps her spirits up."

Something that Orda had said made Edam still with fear. He turned and looked at her intently. Could he tell her? Was their closeness the reason why she was ill? "Orda...Aive and I have been..." If only he knew the words to use!

But Orda smiled gently at Edam and held up her hand. "There is no need to continue. I know what you are trying to tell me. I am old, but I am neither blind nor deaf. The things that you do I have never seen or heard of before, but I don't believe them to be a danger."

Edam looked down at his boots, feeling a warm flush spread across his cheeks. "I'm sorry," he said sheepishly, "we try not to wake you."

"Well, you don't succeed." Orda chuckled, and urged Edam along to the cave.

As they walked, a squirrel crossed their path, carrying a walnut shell between his teeth. Orda looked over at him and said, "He is small; this is his first winter."

The two watched the squirrel climb a tree and disappear into his warm nest. But a few paces later, Orda suddenly stopped, causing Edam to stumble.

"What's wrong, Orda? Are you ill?" Edam put his arm around Orda's shoulders, concern in his eyes.

But Orda shook her head and said, "No, I'm fine. I'm not ill."

"Then what is it? You scared me."

Orda looked back at the squirrel's tree, then back at Edam. There was a strange look in her eyes, and her brow was furrowed in thought.

"What's wrong? Orda?"

But Orda only shook her head again and replied, "Let's keep going."

She began walking and Edam followed along at her side. But every so often, Orda would steal a glance back to the tree, deep in thought. Was it possible?

It was moons before Orda shared her suspicions with anyone. Instead, she continued to care for Aive, always looking for some definite sign that would either prove or disprove her theory. She wasn't sure what it was she was looking for, but Orda was certain that it would be clear when she found it. Edam continued to fear what the future held, and he rarely left Aive's side for long. And Aive, about whom there was so much concern, seemed strangely calm.

The sickness itself had transformed. The mornings gradually improved, as Aive slowly regained the ability to keep food on her stomach. When Aive at last was able to eat, she seemed to make up for lost time—her appetite was rarely satisfied, and none of them knew quite what to make of her hunger. It was not uncommon for the cold of winter to bring a hearty appetite, Orda told them. And for a moon or so, this explanation seemed to satisfy Aive and Edam. But one afternoon, Orda was faced with the knowledge that the time had come for truth.

Edam was out hunting, eager for fresh meat. And he had spent so much time inside the cave, Orda suspected he was also yearning for fresh air. When he left that morning, he had been almost giddy with relief that Aive was recovering, and had laughingly promised Aive as much venison as he could carry. The females spent the day doing chores around the cave—mending, boiling their clothing in a huge pot of lye water, and cooking for the evening meal.

Just after the sun passed its highest point of the day, Aive was sitting at the table, knitting, while Orda baked bread. Orda tried several times to engage Aive in conversation, but each attempt seemed to fall upon deaf ears. The comforting smells of brown bread filled the cave and Orda removed two loaves from the baking stone. When she had placed them away from the fire's heat so they could cool, Orda wiped her hands, poured two mugs of tea, and sat opposite Aive at the table. Aive was working intently and did not look up as Orda approached.

“Aive?” Orda spoke gently, not wanting to startle Aive out of her thoughts.

Aive looked up quickly, then returned to her work. “Yes?”

“You seem troubled.”

Aive shrugged, but did not respond.

“Do you feel ill?”

Aive shook her head no. But then her hands paused in mid-stitch and she shyly looked at Orda. Her mouth opened and she began to form a word, but then she shook her head and looked back down at the knitting in her lap.

Orda sat back in her chair and sighed at the importance of the conversation about to begin. “Tell me.”

Aive again looked up and Orda held her gaze, warmly nodding her encouragement. The younger creature set her knitting on the table and took a deep breath. Finally, she spoke. “I’m scared, Orda.”

Orda sat forward in her chair and her eyes clouded with concern. “Scared? Why are you scared, Aive?”

Tears came to Aive’s eyes and she blinked them away. “I don’t know what’s happening to me. But…”

“But what?”

“I’m changing. I don’t know why. But you’ve seen it, too. I’ve noticed how you look at me. And Edam—I’m sure he sees it. But what does it mean?”

Orda reached across the table and took one of Aive’s hands in her own. It was true; Orda *had* been aware of the changes in Aive’s body, and the fact that she was growing thicker in the middle and fuller in the face, in spite of being ill, had been startling at first. But soon, Orda had come to realize that these changes were good signs that her suspicions had been correct. But as far as Edam

knowing, well, she thought that he was probably blind to anything except the fact that Aive was better.

For a moon or longer, she had been trying to decide the best way to begin this conversation, but all words had seemed foolish. Now, though, with a worried Aive looking at her expectantly, Orda knew that the conversation must continue, correct words or not. She looked Aive in the eye and smiled.

Aive tensed, immediately fearful. "Please, Orda, if it's something horrible, tell me quick."

Orda squeezed Aive's hand and shook her head. "If it's what I think it is, it's not horrible at all. It would be...."

"What?"

Tears came to Orda's eyes at the very thought. "Miraculous. It would be miraculous."

"I don't understand. Please, Orda—just say it, whatever it is."

"Aive, I don't even know how to say it! It will sound foolish to you, I'm sure."

"Try," Aive urged.

Orda patted Aive's hand and began to speak. "Of all of the creatures I've known, no one has ever had the illness you have. It was a puzzle to me, and I had no idea what to do to make you better. But then I started thinking. It's true that I've never seen your sickness in other creatures." Orda paused and took a deep breath. "But I have seen it in animals." She stopped, waiting for Aive's reaction before she continued.

Aive let go of Orda's hands and sat back. She crossed her arms and a look of alarm swept over her face. "Animals? And what happened to them when they had this sickness?"

Orda closed her eyes, aware that her next words could send Aive into a panic if she wasn't careful. "Well, Aive, I've seen animals grow thick in the belly. And then in the spring, there's..."

Aive stood from her chair, staring at Orda with wide eyes. "You tease me, Orda!" When Orda did not answer, Aive slowly sank back into her chair. "Orda? Do you know what you're saying?"

"I do."

"But it's impossible. It's just not possible!"

"Aive, think about it. I have seen you and Edam together in the night. Never before have I seen two creatures do those things. And I have never heard of those things taking place. Maybe it has always been possible, maybe it just never *was* until now." Orda got up and went around the table, then bent and put her arm around Aive's shoulders.

Aive looked up at Orda in disbelief, overwhelmed. "Can it be?"

"As hard as it is to imagine, I believe it to be true. I think you carry life within you."

For nearly a moon, the two creatures grappled with the apparent truth that was facing them, and they struggled to answer the questions that had never before been asked. There was amazement, certainly, but there was also fear. They had

both seen animals bearing young, but neither could even venture a guess as to how Aive's body could do the same. Aive wailed once, panicked that her gut would split into two when the time came. Orda had calmed her, uttering soothing reassurances that were based on nothing but hope. Still, there was reason to be thankful. Aive appeared to be healthy; her appetite remained steady and she was often full of energy as she went about her chores in the cave. Her skin was pink and clear, and her hair was full. And every time Orda asked Aive if there was pain, Aive always assured her there was not.

Orda spent many hours deep in thought, trying to remember every word that Morphea had ever spoken to her, every bit of advice that she had ever learned from healers, every dream that she had ever dreamt. There were no answers, as much as she wanted there to be. And in the middle of winter, with a shimmering blanket of ice and snow on the ground outside, there was no possibility of leaving the cave until a thaw.

Aive's middle grew rounder with each quarter moon that passed, and it was soon decided that Edam must be told. Aive had not wanted to worry him, and Orda had felt it necessary to give Aive time to get used to the idea before they shared the news. But Edam was more observant than they gave him credit for being. He, of course, was aware of some dramatic change taking place right in front of him. He could see the belly growing as Aive walked about the cave. But he could also feel it when he nestled beside her in bed. Edam had seen creatures of various shapes throughout his travels; some had been thin, like the healer. But some had carried extra flesh. This flesh, from what Edam had been able to

determine, was soft and moved when they walked. Aive's extra flesh was hard, solid. It never moved. And that frightened him. If it wasn't flesh, what was it? Still, even as he was consumed by the need to know what exactly was happening with Aive, fear prevented him from asking. And he felt some reassurance by the way that Aive and Orda were acting around him. Orda seemed more relaxed now that Aive was eating again. So Edam comforted himself with the idea that because he had never been very close to female creatures, perhaps he had never before noticed that this growing in the gut was commonplace.

But one morning, Aive did not have the energy that she so often did. Instead of going about her chores around the cave, she instead went back to bed after breakfast. Orda had immediately tended to her, inspecting her belly and asking all kinds of questions about how she was feeling. Edam watched from a distance, not wanting to intrude on such a conversation, but he strained to hear every word. At last, Orda turned to Edam and beckoned him to the bedside.

Edam approached fearfully, heart heavy with dread. When he arrived at Aive's side, he could not speak. He could only look at Orda with wet eyes.

"Sit down beside her, Edam."

Aive patted the bed next to her and motioned for him to join her. Edam sat, blood rushing through him in anticipation.

Aive reached up and rubbed Edam's back. "There is something that you should know."

He turned to look at her and swallowed. His voice was timid and weak. "What it is?"

Aive looked up at Orda, silently giving her the duty of explanation.

Orda pulled up a chair and looked at Edam, offering him a smile. "Aive has a miracle inside of her, Edam."

Edam sat back in surprise. "A miracle?"

"There is life within her."

Edam looked down at the belly and shook his head; Edam knew that words, but Orda's meaning was gibberish. "I don't understand."

"I think that when you and Aive came together, you began something inside of her. That is what grows in her belly. She is fat with life."

"Life?"

Aive reached and took his hand. "Orda thinks that it is possible I could be growing something like Child, Edam."

"But creatures become, Aive. They don't just appear in creatures' guts!" He smiled at them as if they were daft. "Surely it can't be?"

"We waited to tell you until we were sure of what the growing meant." She looked down at Aive and gave her an encouraging smile. "But this morning, I think we have our answer."

"What happened this morning?" He looked to each of the females in return.

"Whatever is inside of my belly moved, Edam. I felt it on the inside. As if someone was softly kneading my insides like dough."

A look of alarm spread over Edam's face, and he put his hands out to Aive, touching her hand in concern. "You are in pain, then!"

But Aive shook her head, smiling. “No. I’m not. It seems that I should be, but it didn’t hurt.”

“But you’re in bed.”

“I was surprised by what I felt. Amazed. It was unexpected.”

Edam stood and began pacing along the side of the bed. “So what now? If life is inside of her, how do we get it out?”

Orda nodded. “A good question, Edam. But I don’t have an answer for you. But you’ve seen animals produce young in the spring, after they’ve grown fat in the middle. It is a necessary process for them—no one has ever witnessed an animal become; perhaps that is the only way new members of their species are introduced. And they survive.”

“But creatures are not meant to bear young!”

“Maybe they are.” Orda reached over and patted Aive’s shoulders warmly. “But meant to or not, it has happened. And we must prepare.”

“How long do we have?” Edam gestured outside. “It snowed last night, on top of snow that had not melted from days ago. Getting much accomplished in this weather would be difficult.”

Orda bent and gently smoothed her hands over Aive’s stomach. She looked up at Edam, then over at Aive. “I think we have a few moons, at least until spring.”

Aive looked at her. “How can you be sure?”

“I had a vision last night. It happened exactly as Morphea had described them to me. As I was getting ready for bed, a vivid scene with motion and sound came to my thoughts.”

Aive sat up and Edam stepped closer. He asked the question both of them wanted to ask. “What did you see?”

“I saw the three of us traveling. There was no snow on the ground, and there were buds on the trees. Some spring flowers. And Aive, you were very large—at least twice the size you are now.”

“Twice the size!” Aive looked down at her stomach and shook her head in amazement. “I don’t see how that’s going to be possible!”

Edam urged Orda to continue. “Please, Orda, tell us more about the vision.”

Orda seemed reluctant to speak.

Aive looked up at saw the perplexed expression on Orda’s face. Immediately, she feared the worst. “You saw something bad, didn’t you?”

“No, not bad. It’s just... well, I don’t think you are meant to bear the creature here.”

“Why not?”

Orda took a deep breath and continued. “In the vision, we were on the outskirts of a unity. Arkhe.”

“Arkhe!” Edam sat down on the bed and looked at Orda. “We won’t be welcomed there. Not after what happened. The healer said that Umak would never allow us back.”

“But you don’t know what has happened in the time you’ve been gone. You’ve been away for five moons. Perhaps time has changed things.”

Aive tugged on Edam’s sleeve. “Oh, Edam. If my body is going to change as Orda has said it will, then I want to go back!”

“Why, Aive? Why do you want to go back there? We were attacked by Umak!”

“But Arkhe is home!”

“After we both nearly ceased being? No, Aive, Arkhe is not home. Not anymore. We’d be better off staying here.”

“But think about it, Edam. Think about how we left Umak. He is the reason why we left. And maybe he is no longer a threat to us.”

“You are willing to risk such a thing? If he sees you fat with another creature like the one he despised, he is sure to have you confined for good—if he lets you live at all!”

“But the healer is there. I want him to help me. I want Orda to help me. Whatever happens come spring, I need them there. And I need you.” Aive reached out and took Edam by the arm. “This scares me, Edam. My body changes in front of my eyes, growing in ways I have never seen before. But I carry *life* inside of me. And the healer will think that as important as we do. He values life above all else. He risked his own life for Child. He would do the same for the creature I carry.”

Edam sighed, “But it is a long journey, Aive. It took us a moon to arrive here.”

“But it only took me a half moon when I made the journey to Arkhe from here. Remember, we had Child when we left Arkhe. She was sick; she needed our attention.”

Edam was quiet for a moment, then looked toward the mouth of the cave. He studied the hides and blanket covering the opening, and he fought hard against tears.

Orda saw this, and gently questioned him. “What is it, Edam?”

“Have you both forgotten Child? She is planted by the rivers. If we leave this cave, then we leave her behind, too.”

Orda stood and went to him, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “There is nothing to say that we will not return. But even if we don’t, she will not be forgotten, Edam.”

Aive spoke up from the bed. “I think of Child every time I touch my belly. She is in my thoughts, and it is my memory of her that gets me through this time. If a creature like Child lives inside of me now, I am eager for this. We lost Child before we were given a chance to see what she would become. Edam—this could be a second chance.” She paused. “But we will never forget Child. She will be with us, wherever we go.”

Edam composed himself and turned to look back at the two females. Their faces were full of expectation and wonder and, above all else, hope. He closed his eyes and thought of Child—of the way it had felt to hold her in his arms, of the way her hair had smelled after a bath, of the way her small fingers had reached out and held onto him. *A second chance.*

The next moons were spent preparing for the journey, at least as much as they were able to in the middle of winter. The days were still often full of snow and ice and bitter wind. But every so often, the air would blow warmer around them, announcing that spring would one day return. Mostly, Orda and Aive stitched large, loose robes for Aive to wear when she got bigger. Edam trapped and smoked as much meat as he could. All of them quietly urged on the thaw.

Edam would find himself staring at Aive as she moved around the cave. She continued to grow, just as Orda had said she would. And as much sense as Orda had made, it was still so very odd and strange and wonderful to think of a creature growing inside of Aive, getting bigger and stronger with each passing day. Aive would sometimes pause in her work and place her hand on the belly. Orda would oftentimes come over and they would marvel at whatever movement the creature made. But Edam had stayed back, away, uncertain. One such time, Aive looked up and caught Edam looking on, eyes wide with curiosity. She motioned to him with her hand, "Come. Feel." When she saw that he was reluctant to move forward, she took a few steps forward, meeting him in the middle of the room. "Come on, Edam. It's something I can't describe to you. You have to feel it."

Edam rose on shaking legs. He slowly walked over to Aive, and stood before her.

Aive reached down and took his hand in her own, then placed it on the bottom of her rounded stomach. She was smiling at him, eager for him to feel. For a moment, nothing happened and Edam just thought again how firm the flesh was, how it felt unlike anything he had ever before touched. But then, without warning, there was something, a flutter, just beneath his palm. He jumped in surprise.

Aive asked him excitedly, "Did you feel that?"

Edam looked up at her and nodded, too overcome to speak. She was smiling at him, and he managed to smile back at her. "That was like magic!"

"Just wait. It'll happen again. It always does." She again took his hand and moved it to another spot on her belly.

Before long, Edam felt something inside of Aive pushing against him. He looked down, and was speechless when he realized that he could actually *see* the creature pushing out. There was the tiniest of protrusions on the top of her stomach, and he laughed as he watched it disappear and then pop out again, larger than ever. Edam looked at Aive and saw that she was laughing, too. "But doesn't that hurt?"

She shook her head. "I only wish that you could feel what I feel, Edam. It does feel strange, but it only hurts when the creature pounds against my hipbone. But even that pain doesn't last."

"But what does it feel like?" Edam's hand was still resting on Aive's belly, and he was eager to learn more.

Aive thought for a moment before answering. "Well, remember when we went fishing on our way here? We caught so many fish that we put them in one of

our water bladders and carried them with us for the next night. Remember how they were angry about having been caught, and they kept swimming up to hit the side of the bladder?"

Edam nodded. "We kept putting our hands up to them and laughing about how good and mad they were!"

"Well, imagine that inside of you. Right here." She smiled and poked Edam in the gut with her finger. "That's what it feels like."

PART III

The Journey Home

It was not long before the steady rain of melting snow fell all around them. They kept peeking their heads out to witness the thaw. The air was still cold—much too cold for a journey—but with each day that passed, they got even more eager for their departure. When the air warmed and when the ground became solid, it would be time.

Orda reminded them often of all the things that needed to be done before they left. She wanted to make sure that they had all the supplies they would need. Meat and fish, herbs of all kinds for healing teas, extra blankets, hides for trading, jars of preserved apples and pickled vegetables. Orda was concerned about Aive having to walk so far with so much extra weight, so she worked on a pair of high boots that would support her ankles. Edam was worried that they might encounter trouble if they came upon a unity like Ashtad, and he was taking no chances. He honed a new knife, just in case. Aive did what she could of the sewing and packing, but Orda urged her to rest often, saying that rest might be hard to come by while they were traveling. Aive tried to protest, but she was really more than happy to oblige.

The creatures in the cave were ready for the journey well before the weather was ready to let them leave. There were warmer days now, certainly, but

they were usually followed by another day or two of frigid air. On the nice days, they spend what time they could outdoors, getting some fresh air and reveling in the sunshine. Orda also wanted to see how Aive would handle walking, and she encouraged her to journey to the rivers several times each quarter moon. Aive was able to make it there without incident, but she always had to stop for a lengthy rest before returning to the cave. Sometimes she made the short trip alone, but usually Edam went with her. He would hold her hand as they encountered rough terrain, but often he would take it anyway, even on flat ground. When they reached the rivers, sometimes they would stroll along the water and watch the current. At other times, they would lie on their backs where Child was planted and watch the clouds overhead. Always, they would speak of what the future was going to bring them, and of Arkhe.

One afternoon while Aive napped, Edam passed the lazy hours working on a project. He walked into the near woods and selected a few solid lengths of wood. He carried them over to where Aive rested and began to whittle them. Before long, the ground was light yellow with shavings, and he sat back to admire his work. Smiling, he fished in his pack for some strips of hide and wound them around the carved pieces of wood. When that was done, he searched the water's edge for some shells or colorful pieces of stone.

Aive awoke just as Edam was tying the last of the shells to the piece of hide. She stood up sleepily, stretched her back, and walked over to him. "What have you been up to?"

Edam stood up and stepped back from his work, gesturing to the ground in front of him.

Aive stepped forward to get a closer look, and tears came to her eyes when she saw what Edam had done. Three lengths of wood had been lashed together to resemble a star, with bits of rock and shell dangling down and swaying in the air. The wood had been carved with all sorts of things—flower blossoms; rivers; a cave that Aive took to be Orda’s; and figures that reminded Aive of the healer, Orda, Edam, and herself. The entire creation was lashed to a single, uncarved pole; this pole had been pushed deep into the earth by Child’s mound.

Edam came forward and slipped his arm gently around Aive’s waist. “We’ll be leaving soon. But I didn’t want us to forget where she was planted. So I made a marker.”

Aive turned to Edam, tears still threatening to fall, and hugged his neck tightly. “No, you did more than that. You told her story.”

It was time to begin the journey, and they all felt it. The days were warmer, the nights were bearable under a thick blanket, and the earth was beginning to awaken around them. The last of the belongings were packed away into travel bags, the flames were doused at the fire, and the animals were set free to roam; Orda’s return was uncertain, and there was no one to care for them in her absence.

When they were certain they had everything that they would need, the group of three began walking—the start of the long journey back to Arkhe. They

were quiet as they walked from the cave, each deep in thought, each silently hoping that the trip would go smoothly. But not far from the cave, Orda stopped and asked them to wait. She walked quickly to the cave, was lost in the shadows for a moment, and emerged again. She did not say what she had gone back to retrieve; neither Aive nor Edam felt it right to ask.

The hours turned into days, and the days slipped into quarter moons. They followed the same route that Aive had taken the previous year—north, up through the Cetu valley. The spring was new, and they had to walk through soaking rains on many days, but the weather happily stayed warm. As they walked, they were aware of grasses greening up all around them, of birds calling out to them as they passed, and of flowers popping up from the ground and greeting them with their bright petals.

Aive kept a steady pace; they awoke early in the morning and walked until it was time for the midday meal. Then they would rest for a few hours until she was able to continue. None of them had any idea when the creature inside of Aive would decide to appear, and each day the level of anticipation grew. The creature continued to squirm inside of her, and the belly grew; it was nearly as big as Orda had predicted. Aive patted her fattening stomach and laughed when she felt the movements inside of her, but Edam was aware that Aive was as full of worry as she was with joy. In the night, sometimes he would awake and turn to find Aive beside him, eyes staring out at the night. He would move close to her and hold her tightly, saying all he could to calm her fears. But they both knew that his comforting words were not promises; they were nothing more than spoken hope.

The pains began just as they were approaching Arkhe's far lands. They had been walking since before dawn, and it was nearly time for them to stop for their midday meal. The group was walking slower than they usually did, but that made sense; after 19 days of travel, they were all weary and sore. Aive—normally the most talkative of the three—had been quiet this day, but she simply shrugged off Edam's and Orda's questions of concern, explaining that her back was sore and that she was having some pains occasionally in her belly. She appeared calm, but her voice was tight.

Orda promised to make her a tea that would calm the muscles when they stopped to eat, but there was little more she could do. She suspected that it was nearing time for the creature to appear, but she held her tongue. They would continue to keep a watchful eye on her, but they all knew that it was imperative that they keep moving for as long as Aive was able. Here on the outlands, there was nothing. The land was rugged, there were few trees for cover, and the streams were all much further away than any of them would have liked. They simply had no choice but to keep walking; their meal would be quick, and eaten while they traveled. They could not afford to stop.

For hours they kept walking, slowing every so often when Aive would have another pain. They were coming closer together now, and they were steadily getting more intense. But she simply stopped walking, leaned on Edam and Orda for support, and breathed through the pains. Orda would reach behind Aive and rub the small of her back, trying to ease the taut muscles. Edam would hold out

his hand for Aive to grip. Eventually, she would sigh deeply and they would know that the pain had passed. After a moment of rest, Aive would begin walking. Now, more than ever, she was desperate to be back in Arkhe. The pains scared her more than she let on, and she worried about the pains she still had to face. Aive could feel panic threatening to rise within her, but she forced it down and continued walking. She had no choice.

Eventually, just as the sun was setting, they approached the woods surrounding Arkhe. They all breathed a bit easier as soon as they entered into the forest, for they were comforted by the knowledge that their journey was nearly complete. Within an hour, they would be setting foot into the unity square. But this fact alone, although a tremendous relief, was also somewhat terrifying. What awaited them in Arkhe? Along the way, the three had discussed the best way to enter into the unity. Orda had suggested that Aive and Edam wait in the forest while she went in alone. She would seek out the advice of the healer, and when she found him, she would tell him that Edam and Aive waited for him in hiding. But Edam had refused to allow this plan to go forth. He fiercely hoped that the healer was still in a position of power, but he knew that if Umak had awakened, it was likely that the healer had been banished. They simply could not risk Orda walking into a potentially dangerous situation alone; if she entered Arkhe, it would be as one of three.

The forest floor was angled, and Aive had trouble with the slope. She stopped often now, panting and clutching the nearest tree. Sweat ran in rivulets down her face and neck, and her robe was soaked. Orda insisted that she drink,

but Aive kept refusing to put anything in her stomach. Edam yearned to run ahead and seek out the healer. But he was hesitant to put Orda into an uncertain situation; if he went in alone, there would be a delay, if not danger. So he stood next to Aive and cradled her elbow, offering her what support he could. They tried talking to pass the time, and to help soothe frayed and anxious nerves, but the terrain was trying enough that it was impossible to hold a conversation. But even if the land had been flat, there still likely would have been silence; each creature wrestled with fear, making them crave the quiet.

Edam was ahead of Orda and Aive, at the edge of the woods. Looking through the trees, he could see the outlines of huts and structures in Arkhe proper. Hidden in the trees, and looking out at the unity now bathed in moonlight, Edam shook his head in disbelief; was this really the same unity that had experienced so much turmoil? On this night, it looked calm and welcoming. Edam dropped his pack and was fishing out water bladders and jerky; he thought it wise to stop and rest for a few minutes before they went any further. But just before she and Orda reached Edam, Aive doubled over and called out in pain. Orda reached out for her and Edam came running. Together, they lowered her to the ground and sat beside her. Aive was clutching her belly and beads of sweat had begun to form on her upper lip.

Orda instructed Edam to fetch the water bladders, and she helped Aive adjust her position so that her back was to a tree. Aive was breathing hard now, panting through the pain.

Edam wetted a cloth with some water and gently smoothed the rag over Aive's skin. Orda held her hand and patted her arms soothingly. "Just breathe, Aive, and try to keep calm."

Another pain came, the worst yet, and Aive was near hysterics now, faced with the reality that somehow, the creature inside of her was going to come out. She had not expected pain like this—the animals she had seen bearing young always seemed undaunted, as if the process was not something that even warranted worry. But Aive felt as if the muscles of her belly had all clenched together in a relentless, severe, fiery cramp. She cried out as the pain and the fear got the best of her.

Edam had tears in his own eyes as he watched Aive struggle, but he leaned in close to her. "Please, Aive, stay as quiet as you can. We're close to huts and they'll hear you," he begged.

Orda looked at Edam and said, "We can't worry about the noise. We have to go in there for help. We have to find the healer. She can't stay here, Edam." Her voice was calm, but firm.

Edam glanced at the unity through the trees and shook his head. "But it isn't safe. We must go in when the time is right. We have to be cautious."

Aive grabbed Edam's hand. "Look at me, Edam."

He turned, surprised to hear her voice. She was breathing heavily, and tears and sweat ran down her face.

"We did not make this trip just so we could sit here in the trees!" She began sobbing, "We can't be cautious. There's no time."

“But...”

“Please, Edam. We have to go in.” Aive’s face scrunched up as another wave of pain came over her.

“Edam, we have to hurry. I have no idea what’s going to happen next, but we need to get her someplace clean and warm. She’s starting to shiver.”

Edam looked Orda in the eye, finally nodding reluctantly. “You’re right.”

Orda sighed and looked down at Aive. “Alright, Aive, now listen to me. When the pain stops, you squeeze my hand and let me know. We’ll pull you to your feet and we’ll keep going.”

Aive nodded and continued to breathe.

“Edam, go get the packs.”

Orda gathered her own packs and arranged them on her shoulders. When the squeeze came at last, Edam and Orda helped Aive stand and they supported her between them, with Edam taking the brunt of the weight. Slowly, they shuffled their way through the remaining trees and stepped into Arkhe.

It was quiet in Arkhe as they moved slowly toward the unity square. Creatures were in their huts, relaxing after the evening meal and preparing for sleep. But that changed when Aive cried out, piercing the night with her scream. Heads appeared in windows at the sound, and soon creatures were stepping out of their doorways. There was silence from them; they recognized Edam and Aive, of course. But it was clear that they had never expected to see them return. And they were terrified by what they were seeing and hearing—Aive was swollen and

screaming out in pain. They stood back, in the safety of their doorways—ready in case they needed to retreat.

But one creature stepped forward from the dark. Edam saw the creature and began weeping with relief.

“Is that Edam?”

Edam recognized the voice and blinked away his tears. “Semija!”

She rushed over to them and took some of the bags from Orda. “What happened? We were told that you would not be returning to Arkhe.” She looked quickly over them, then spoke again quietly, obviously disappointed. “You did not bring the creature?”

Edam shook his head, overwhelmed. “Aive needs help, Semija. She needs the healer.”

Semija glanced quickly at Aive and nodded. “I’ll go for him.” She dropped the bags and ran quickly across the square. The other creatures remained in the dark, silent and anonymous.

Edam spotted the well close by and he steered them to it. At the base of the well, there were two great blocks of stone that creatures often rested against. When they reached the well, he and Orda helped Aive to lean against one of the blocks. She was shaking with exertion and pain, and Orda stood next to her, supporting Aive with her own weight.

“It hurts, Orda. I’ve never known such pain.” Aive’s eyes filled with tears and Orda held her close, her own eyes wet with emotion.

Within moments, they could hear footsteps in the distance. Semija ran toward them and said breathlessly that the elder was on his way. Edam's breath caught in his throat, and he looked at Orda with panic in his eyes.

"We should leave! We aren't safe here."

"It's too late, Edam! We'd never make it."

Edam looked at Semija. "Where is the healer? We need the healer!"

Semija kept nodding, "Yes, yes, the healer is coming. You are safe here."

Edam wanted to ask her about Umak, but a voice cut through the night.

"You have returned."

Edam and Orda slowly turned to face the speaker. The elder's robes were new, the colors vibrant. The knuckles were knarled a bit with age and the shoulders hunched slightly. But the face was kind. Edam wept openly. "Please help her, Healer."

The healer stepped forward, taking in Aive with his eyes. She was gripping the edge of the stone block with white knuckles and her eyes were closed against the pain. And her stomach! Aive's condition left him speechless and he looked over at Orda, not wasting time on a formal introduction. "What's happened?"

Orda responded by saying, "Let's get her inside. I'll tell you on the way."

Edam grabbed all the travel packs and handed them to Semija. Then he leaned over and picked up Aive, groaning a bit under the extra weight. She whimpered at being moved, but she burrowed her head in Edam's neck. The healer led them to his hut and closed the door behind them.

Within the hour, it seemed that every Arkhe creature had gathered outside. Word had spread that Edam had returned, that Aive was dangerously ill, and that there was a stranger with them. But from inside the healer's hut, none of this mattered. Aive was their main concern.

Orda told the healer her suspicions about what was happening, and he was so surprised that he dropped a towel he had been using to wipe away Aive's sweat. But any disbelief that he may have had disappeared as soon as they removed Aive's robes. She was straining and sobbing, complaining of the pain. Edam held one of her hands and Semija gripped the other. The healer and Orda inspected the belly and Aive's sides, trying to determine how the creature was going to free itself from Aive's body. Just then a terrible pain came over Aive and she spread her legs in response.

They saw it then, and were startled by the sight. The healer and Orda stared at Aive, eyes wide, then at each other.

Shaking his head in disbelief, the healer quietly asked Orda, "Is this possible?"

Orda looked back at him and let out a worried breath. "It has to be."

Aive was quiet for a moment, resting with her eyes closed. The healer scurried about his hut gathering blankets and towels and placing them under Aive's waist and legs. Then he covered her with a large quilt. Then he went to the hearth and put a large pot of water over the fire. When it had boiled, he dropped some pieces of linen in and fished them out. After letting them cool for a moment,

he put them around Aive's abdomen and legs—on top of the blankets so they wouldn't burn her.

Edam saw this. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to relax the muscles. The heat might help to take away the pain."

Aive dozed for a few more minutes, then roused when a fresh wave of pain came over her. She leaned forward, crying out and clutching the blankets. For an hour, Aive struggled against the pain, and Orda and the healer inspected the progress. With each new pain, more of the tiny creature was pushed out, but it appeared stuck.

"Help me!" Aive sobbed.

The healer wiped away the sweat from his eyes with the shoulder of his robe and then moved to Edam and Semija. "Help me get her up, so that she's crouching on her knees."

Aive screamed when they tried to move her, but she was at last bent forward, resting her arms on Edam's shoulders and her knees on the bed. Another pain came and she clenched her teeth. Orda cried out, "A nose! I see a nose! It's a head!"

The progress continued, until at last a tiny creature slipped out from Aive and onto the bed. Aive fell forward, exhausted, with all of her weight on Edam. He lowered her gently to the bed and wiped her face with a cool rag.

For a moment, everyone stared at the creature on the bed. It looked nothing like Child—she had been smooth and pink, and this creature was almost blue and was covered in blood. Orda grabbed it first and rubbed it vigorously with

a towel, wiping the skin clean. She could feel a tiny heartbeat, but the creature still had not taken a breath. She opened the small mouth and reached in with the tip of her finger, trying to clear away the mucous there. Still, the creature did not take a breath.

Aive turned herself, trying to look. "Orda? What's happening?"

"It's not breathing, Aive." The healer reached over and wiped the creature's nose and tapped it gently on the chest. There was still a heartbeat, but it was growing fainter now.

Edam looked from Orda to the healer. "Do something!"

Orda turned the creature over on the stomach and pounded the back with the heel of her hand. She was crying now, everyone was crying. Nothing was working, and this new creature was going to cease being before taking a single breath.

Aive struggled to sit up. "The blue vial!" She reached up and felt around her neck, then went cold when she remembered that it no longer hung there. After she had thrown it at Orda, she had never even seen the vial again. She had felt betrayed by it, and had done her best to forget that it had ever existed. Now the feeling was strong inside of her, and she had nothing to give. "No! Oh, Morphea, I'm so sorry!" She buried her face in the pillow, body wracked by violent sobs.

But Orda had already reached around her own neck. The blue vial had hung there ever since they had left the cave. Edam saw this and his eyes went wide. He shook Aive, too surprised to speak. The healer reached over and pulled out the stopper. With a deep breath, Orda forced her shaking hand still and poured

the liquid into the lifeless mouth. The vial was more than half full, and she poured the remaining liquid in. Every drop. There was a gurgle, then nothing more.

All eyes were focused on the creature in front of them. Aive, realizing everyone else was neither speaking nor moving, turned to look. She saw the creature in Orda's arms, then the blue vial dangling around Orda's neck. Her eyebrows came together. "The vial?"

Orda nodded. "I went back for it. I carried it. But I carried it for you." Her eyes glistened.

The hut was silent now, and the spirits of five creatures urged the tiny creature to take a breath.

"Orda, let me hold it."

"Him. The creature is male." She passed the creature to Aive, who cradled him just as she had cradled Child.

Orda turned away from the bed. She could not bear the sight. Her eyes filled with tears and the healer came over and put an arm around her shoulders to console her. Semija stood there silently, a thick lump caught in her throat. Edam felt himself ready to burst with sadness and turned away so that Aive would not see the devastation on his face. Aive cradled the creature's tiny head in her hand and raised him up, then kissed him gently on the cheeks and forehead. She closed her eyes, imagining all that could have been.

But just when everyone was certain that this life was not meant to be, there was a deep cough, then a cry.

Orda and the healer turned to face the bed. Semija sank into the nearest chair, overcome by what she had witnessed. Edam turned back from the window, tears still fresh on his face. And Aive opened her eyes.

The creature was crying now, and great, fat tears dripped down his face and into his hairline. He showed his smooth pink gums to them all as he wailed, and he waved his fists in the air, as if punctuating his unhappiness. There was a head full of dark hair. Blue eyes shone through the tears. His skin had pinked. At last, he resembled Child.

Orda came over to the bed with a thick blanket and tucked it around the new creature. "You've created life."

Aive looked up at her. "You said I would." Her words caught in her throat. "You knew."

Orda shook her head slowly, awed. "But I never knew it would be like this. What a wondrous thing to have witnessed."

Aive looked again to the blue vial hanging on Orda's chest. "You went back for it. I left it, but you went back for it. He's alive because of you."

Orda shook her head. "No, Aive, he's alive because there was someone here to love him." She looked down at the small, sleepy face. "He grew inside of you, out of the love you had with Edam. And now, together, you will guide him as you would have guided Child."

Aive bent and gently kissed the creature's soft head, which was covered with fine, dark hair. "I felt love before I even saw him, Orda. I never would have thought it possible."

“But you carried him inside of you. You nurtured him for many moons. Love does not need to be seen, Aive. Love is felt.”

Edam stepped forward, placing a warm arm around Aive’s shoulders. With his other hand, he reached out and gingerly stroked the new creature’s cheek. “He should have a name.” He looked at the healer. “Now that you’re elder, naming him is your right, Healer.”

The healer approached the bed and smiled as he looked down at the creature in Aive’s arms. He had quieted. One tiny fist had found its way into his mouth, and he was sucking on it sleepily. Aive held the blanketed creature up to him. “Please, Healer, hold him.”

The healer nodded and opened his arms, then closed them securely when the creature had been placed inside. For a long moment, he simply gazed down at the sight before him in awe. Then he spoke. “I am honored little one, but I think that Orda should give you your name.” He looked up at Orda, smiled warmly at her, and placed the creature in her waiting arms.

Orda sat on the edge of the bed and stroked the fine hairs on the creature’s head. For a moment, she closed her eyes, searching for a name that would fit. The others sat forward, eager to hear what she had decided.

After a bit, Orda smiled and opened her eyes. She looked down at the creature and spoke softly to him. “There is a word that I heard often at the temple, when Morphea spoke of you. She called you a qayin, a created one. I’ve never heard the word used as a name, but I think it fits you.”

Aive smiled. "Qayin." Her eyes filled with tears. "It is a fine name, Orda. Thank you."

Orda smiled back, through a few tears of her own, and placed Qayin in Aive's arms, then patted her cheek with an aged hand. The healer smiled and leaned in. "Welcome to Arkhe, Qayin. Now, I think that you both should get some sleep." He looked at Aive. "Rest now, Aive. I'll be back to check on you at first light." He bent again and kissed her gently on the forehead.

The healer straightened and walked to the door; Semija followed. Edam crossed the room quickly and grabbed the healer's robe. Quietly, he asked, "Umak?"

The healer shook his head. "His journey has continued. There is more to discuss, when the time is right. But you are safe here and Arkhe welcomes you all." He gave Edam a warm smile and patted his shoulder. "I am glad that you have returned."

"Thank you, Healer. And thank you, Semija. For all you've done for us."

"Thank you for coming home. Get some rest, Edam. I'll see you all tomorrow." There were farewells all around, and the door closed.

Edam went back over the bed and sat beside Aive. Orda took Qayin and wrapped him with clean linen, then handed him to Edam. "Your son."

Puzzled, Edam looked up. "My son?"

"Your offspring, Edam." She smiled. "Why don't you sit with him while I tend to Aive?"

Edam looked down. "Qayin. My son." He looked up at Orda and smiled broadly. He took Qayin to the table and sat, holding him close to his chest.

Orda turned her attention to Aive. First she prepared a mug of tea for her, then she wet a cloth with some of the hot water and sat on the bed. "Try to drink as much of that tea as you can. It'll help with the pain."

Aive sipped the tea while Orda began bathing her with long, soothing strokes. "Orda?"

Without looking up from her work, Orda responded, "Yes, Aive?"

"Will there be others?"

"More like Qayin?" She paused and looked at Aive thoughtfully. "Yes. I think that Qayin is the first, but more will come. Others will experience the closeness, and they will also create life."

Aive sat quietly for a moment, resting her eyes. But again, she opened them and posed a question. "What happens now?"

"Well, you and Edam will teach Qayin of the world around him. You will teach him of the earth and to appreciate all that grows in it. Edam will teach him of mountains and rivers. You will show him that there is life beyond Arkhe. And you will tell him how he came into this world. He must know of his beginning, of his emergence."

"What will he be?"

Orda looked thoughtfully at Edam, and at Qayin in his lap. "He will be loved. That's the only answer that matters now." She looked back at Aive and continued washing her. "Rest now."

Aive sighed contentedly, then sleepily looked over at the chair. Qayin was fully awake now, and his bright blue eyes were focused on the lines of Edam's face. Edam smiled down at him and stroked the tiny hand with his finger. Just before she slipped peacefully into slumber, Aive looked at Edam's face. His eyes were drawn to Qayin, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and his lips were whispering soothing words. The candle flickered then, and the shadows shifted on Edam's face. Something else caught Aive's eye: a tear trailed down Edam's cheek. She saw it fall and drip onto Edam's thumb—a thumb that was being clutched tightly by a tiny fist.

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