

Chapter 1

Blood spattered the violet leaves, staining them a deeper purple, but not leaving them so saturated as to quiet their natural crunch when caught underfoot. Hunting in the Deep Wood in autumn always posed a particular difficulty for hunters as even the lightest footfall could not be completely silenced. This was not a problem for Sullion. He had been hunting and tracking in these woods since he was a kit at his parents' heels. They had been master hunters and they had taken steps to ensure that their wisdom and experience were passed to the next generation: Sullion and his elder brothers.

It had been a long and harsh hunt that preceded his parents' crossing into the Everall, leaving Sullion and his brothers orphans. Weeks of hard rains had destabilized a rock face and the couple were swept away in a mudslide. Their broken bodies were found over a mile away several days later. Sullion had only recently crossed into manhood.

The trail of blood had led him here and Sullion knelt beside the broken body at his feet, his long braid of brown hair falling over his shoulder. His arrows were still lodged in the thick hide of the onusa buck, but the wounds no longer pulsed with blood as the death spasms of its heart had given way to stillness long moments before. He laid one hand, palm down, on the animal's forehead, closed his eyes, and whispered the sacred words, *from life goes life*, before beginning the short work of preparing the carcass for travel. He had just finished binding the buck's legs together when his right ear twitched, turning slightly towards his rear. A subtle sniff of the air confirmed what he heard.

"Your prowl has gotten sloppy," he spoke to the air as he finished securing his kill. Silence answered first then was followed by the familiar crunch of leaves.

"If I had wanted to sneak up on you I could have. I chose not to because prowling around a friend is considered rude," a smooth tenor voice called back. Sullion's upper lip curled back into a smile bearing the brilliant white of several sharp teeth and very prominent canines.

"As if manners had anything to do with it, Rai."

"Manners have everything to do with it, my friend," the other man replied as he reached down to help lift the body onto their sled. In contrast to Sullion's long brown hair, Raiyth kept his blonde locks short causing it to stand in little spikes on his head. Raiyth's golden skin was darker than Sullion's sandy tan and the scar over Raiyth's right eye further set them apart. Though for all their differences, the two men, both tall and lean, were more like brothers than simply friends.

Raiyth took a good look at the buck as he shifted it into a more secure position on top of the other kills of the day.

"This isn't a very large buck. You sure it's fully matured?" he asked. Sullion slung his bow over his back and secured the sled's pull straps over one shoulder.

“It’s not, but it’s the eldest I’ve seen. The herds have thinned; some are moving away towards the Sun Grasses I think. Can’t tell why though,” he replied as he handed the other strap to Raiyth who took it and placed it on his own shoulder. The two began their march forwards through the woods back to town.

“Something must be scaring them,” Raiyth pondered aloud. “Predation?”

Sullion shook his head.

“If there were a new predator in the area we would have seen something by now. Tracks, kills, dens, something, and yet there’s nothing, not even spoor.”

“Other hunters then,” Raiyth supplied. Sullion gave a slight tilt of his head as he considered it, but eventually shook his head.

“I don’t think there are any Gal’nra settlements near enough and besides,” he said as he cast a glance and grin at his friend. “Game hunting really isn’t their style.”

“Hardly,” Raiyth laughed in response. “Most Gal’nra have all the stealth and subtlety of a tonk beast.”

The laughter shared between the two passed naturally and the silence that took its place was companionable as they made their way home. The shadows in the Deep Wood grew longer as they moved, but there was still enough daylight to see them back. Even were it not so, both Raiyth and Sullion were masters of their trade and had little to fear of the dark.

The sheer denseness of the wood slowed their progress more than the weight of the sled, but the path they took was a well-traveled trail created by numerous identical hunts. Sullion adjusted the strap on his shoulder moving it slightly so it would rest squarely on the leather of his vest and not on his tunic or skin. Raiyth wiped the sweat from his brow while casting a hidden glance at his companion. He looked past the dense groups of trees, the small voids between the trunks dimming as the sun began to sink below the horizon.

“You’re being wasteful, you know,” he said with no preamble. Sullion, who had been miles away in thought turned to his friend with a furrowed brow. Raiyth noted the expression and decided to continue.

“You should be teaching or serving the Temple, not doing... well, whatever it is you do most of the day,” he finished. Sullion turned his gaze doggedly ahead, not looking at his friend as he answered.

“We all serve in our own way,” he answered plainly, but Raiyth wasn’t having it.

“You’re one of the best trackers in a generation and you know it. And as a Shaf’rani,”

“I am not a Shaf’rani,” he interrupted.

“You are Shaf’rani. The Shaf’ra still speaks to you whether or not you choose to listen,” Raiyth spoke with a slight shrug. “But fine, your choice is your choice, but what of Challa?”

“Challa is still a kit.”

“He’s of an age. Herani has begun her study at the Temple. Doesn’t he want to go?”

“It is not his decision or yours,” Sullion snapped this time looking directly into Raiyth’s green eyes. “Muzzle it.”

“Lio,” Raiyth began, but Sullion had already turned his attention away from him, the stubborn set of his jaw alerting Raiyth that his friend had clawed in and was not in a mood to listen or be persuaded from his current course. Raiyth sighed and watched as the light from the city could be seen as the trees began to thin.

The pair didn’t speak as they approached the gates of Go’ch City. Made from the appropriately named iron bark tree, the three gates were each over twenty feet tall and were flanked by towers manned at all times by watchers. More iron bark timbers composed the great wall surrounding the entire city, each log well over thirty feet tall and more than two feet in diameter. But even the impressive height of the walls couldn’t compare with the natural reach of the trees that filled the Deep Woods and cradled the city itself. Go’ch was one of two major settlements in Goz, but unlike its sister city, Go’ch was comprised multiple levels, those structures built on the ground and those built in the trees. Every inch of the city bustling with To’grani of all ages.

The To’grani. Believed to be descendants of the cha’al, a large feline predator, the To’grani kept the ferocity and nimble stealth of the cat if not the form – evolution making them bipedal, tail-less, and mostly hairless. The upright, triangular ears they kept, as well as the excellent hearing, sense of smell, and night vision. Sharp teeth, strong nails, but no claws, the To’grani were a toughly built people made of lean and limber muscle and reinforced bone plates on their hands, feet, chest, and head. And yet from this basic template of life there was great variety among them. Their smooth, hairless skin came in beautiful shades of gold, tan, auburn, brown, and black. The hair on their head was usually kept long and came in just as many colored variations as their skin. Put simply, the To’grani were a beautiful people and truly favored among all the Little Gods.

The two hunters passed through the open northern gates, Raiyth shouting greetings to the guards standing watch above them. Sullion closed his eyes for a moment and simply allowed himself to take in the smells and sounds of home. He opened his eyes again, a small smile on his face as they pulled their sled down the wide paths of the crafter’s district. Some familiar face poked out now and then to say hello, but mostly the hunters were undisturbed as they continued their slow journey towards the tanneries where they would deliver the animals for processing. As they moved past crafter stands and shops, a voice called out from behind them.

“Sullion!”

Both men stopped and turned towards the older To'grani male that was approaching them, wiping hands blackened with ash on his apron. His hair was almost completely silver and his teeth yellow and beginning to dull, but he was still well-muscled and sharp of mind, deserving of both their respect and attention.

“Soft paws, Coceay. How are you today?” Sullion greeted with a deferential dip of his head.

“Soft paws, to you both friends,” Coceay replied with a smile and short bow to both masters then he directed himself to Sullion specifically. “I must ask your forgiveness for bringing you troublesome news.”

“You are forgiven,” Sullion replied evenly. “What news, friend?”

“There was a scratch a few hours ago between two kits. It happened right in front of my forge. Neither boy was hurt too badly, but it was a fairly vicious fight.”

Sullion growled low in his throat. There would only be one reason for the smith to bring a fight between two children to his attention.

“Challa was one of the kits?” he asked knowing full well what the answer would be.

“Yes, and the other one... the one with golden hair and eyes... Dinir's son.”

“Macuna,” Raiyth supplied. Coceay nodded.

“Yes, Macuna. I broke up the fight and sent both boys home. I was planning to visit both you and Dinir once I locked up for the day.”

Sullion nodded. The news was not surprising nor was the name of the other boy. Suddenly tired, he sighed quietly.

“I thank you, friend, for your vigilance.”

“May the pack always provide,” Coceay said bowing once more. Sullion and Raiyth echoed his bow and his words. Once the merchant had returned to his shop, Raiyth reached over for the strap on Sullion's shoulder.

“Go home. I will see to this,” he offered. For a moment Sullion entertained the idea of protesting, but insisting to stay would only be for the sake of delaying a conversation that was inevitable. Instead, he nodded his thanks and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder before turning down a side path between two shops and heading to his home on the outer edge of the city.