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## **Epic Title**

A story of awesomeness

# Chapter 1

The city was just beginning to awaken and yet no one was aware of the faint shadow gliding effortlessly across the highest buildings. Coming to a stop above the finest clothing store in the city, the shadow disappeared inside through a side window.

Having been inside this very shop numerous times, it was obvious something wasn't the same. Items were in their proper place instead of strewn about the back room. While in its cleaned state the storage room appeared twice as big as normal, and allowed the thief to move quite quickly across it to the item of desire. After a quick glance around, a wooden box was opened to reveal an empty space where a necklace should have been.

"Is this what you're looking for?" A gruff voice from behind growled.

Quickly turning, the thief sees the shopkeeper's large frame filling up the doorway, a bright stone necklace hanging from his thick hand.

"It's about time I catch you for good. Finally, after months of theft I can turn you in to the Protectors!" The shopkeeper yelled.

A quick survey around the room revealed the reason for the recent cleaning. There was absolutely nothing to hide behind, throw around or use as a distraction. In the past, escapes had been easy with the aid of large piles of mess to hide in, or expensive items to throw around as a distraction, but today would be much tougher.

"I see you've noticed I did a little renovation after our last encounter. There will be no escape for you this time so you may as well just make it easy on both of us." The shopkeeper stated.

Behind a thick black cowl little could be seen of the thief, revealing only a slight smile at the latest statement. With a quick flourish, the black figure darted towards the same window it entered through only to be blocked halfway across the room by the shopkeeper's burly figure.

"Just give up!" Bellowed the shopkeeper as it swung its large fist towards the shadow's head, barely missing as the black figure slid between his legs.

The running slide threw the shopkeeper off guard and allowed the thief to dive out the window on to a neighboring roof. Thinking the chase over, the thief was more than a little surprised to hear a loud thud as the shopkeeper made the four meter leap across the roofs, landing quite ungracefully.

"You think you can escape me that easily! Like I already said, you will be turned over today once and for all!" And with that the shopkeeper charged forward.

Quickly turning and darting across the roofs the thief realized the shopkeeper may be right, coming up very quickly was the end of this block and there was no way to make the jump across to the next one. Skidding to a halt the thief turned to face the shopkeeper.

"I told you, you can't win today! I've scouted out every possible escape! You may as well lower that cowl and reveal who you are!" bellowed the shopkeeper across the ten meters that separated them. Glancing around quickly the thief turned back and could only smile at the shopkeeper before waving goodbye and dropping the three stories to the ground below.

Rushing to the edge of the building the shopkeeper could hardly believe someone would choose to take their own life over being turned in to the Protectors. At first he saw nothing, but at that moment a figure burst from the massive pile of furs on the ground being prepped by the tanner for that days' work. With a quick salute to the shopkeeper the dark figure darted down the nearby alleyway and was out of his grasp yet again.

Luck must have been on the thief's side today for that pile of furs to be there when most needed. After the darkness of the alleyway had fully consumed the black figure, and the shopkeeper's ranting was far in the distance, only then did Eleni feel comfortable pulling back her cowl and stashing her black cloak into a recess in the buildings. While it wasn't necessarily illegal for someone to own a black cloak in the city limits, it would definitely draw attention.

Many years ago while struggling in the Great Wars her people had forsaken the stealth arts for a more prideful approach, or at least that is what they taught each generation of warriors. Despite this, Eleni had always been much better at sneaking around than a straight forward fight. Most people attributed her lack of physical prowess to the fact that she was a female in a male dominated profession, while others simply believed she was just innately weak. But she knew the truth, deep down she knew she may not be the strongest, but some day she would become the best Protector the city had ever seen.

At that very moment the clock tower rang out several times signaling to her that she was very much late for today's training, and darted through the remaining streets to the training facilities.

Coming around the last corner, the magnificent sight of the training hall came into full view. Two colossal stone Protectors standing ever vigilant on either side of the giant entrance. Not a single person was to be found wandering outside as class had already started and punishment for tardiness was quite severe. As Eleni quickly and quietly walked through the hallway towards her room, a familiar face leaned against the wall just a few paces outside the doorway.

"Namus, what are you doing! You're going to be counted late too and then we will both be in trouble." scolded Eleni.

"I already checked in, I just told them I forgot something in my locker." Namus said with a grin; they frequently covered for one another in matters of tardiness.

Without another word Namus winked at Eleni and signaled for her to wait in the hallway for his cue. Walking into the classroom Namus thanked his good luck that the instructor hadn't finished attendance yet. Instead of taking his seat he walked straight up to the instructor and began a long winded argument about the effectiveness of two small weapons verse one large one.

Days like today Eleni was glad she was the quietist and quickest among her class. While they were all entranced with Namus' debate with the instructor she easily slid into the back of the room and took her seat near the window overlooking the great arena. The same arena she would hopefully be graduating from within in just a few short weeks.

Noticing Eleni in her seat, Namus quickly ceded his argument to the instructor and took his seat, not wanting to further infuriate the already short fused Instructor Khammo.

Despite being the last day before her class's final test, it was going to be a long day; and an even longer two weeks.

On the other side of the facility Eleni's younger brother was also in a lecture learning about history, government and oddly enough, birth.

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"And that is how we as a race came into existence." his teacher exclaimed.

"So when the world was about to end, our ancestors 'nobly' hid in the rocks?" inquired Treynor.

"Well they didn't hide. The Crux was a terrible time of an unpredictable nature. When the meteor struck and it looked like the world was ending, they viewed the mountains as the safest place to be." the teacher clarified.

"They also say how terrible the Crux was, but what was it exactly? It doesn't seem like it could have been that bad if people running to the mountains survived." blurted out Treynor.

At that the entire class gasped and turned to see the look on Mrs. Lyr's face, which was at this point a most unflattering shade of purple.

"Why you insolent little child! Our ancestors were under a great deal of stress. The natural laws of physics at the time had completely broken down! Entire cities were swallowed up into the depths of the earth, and a giant meteor was careening directly for them. You should be thankful they had the foresight to realize the mountains and the earth itself would keep them safe and protected for what was about to come." The finality in Mrs. Lyr's voice did not leave any room for argument. She then turned to the chalk board to continue discussing the various mountain tribes around the world.

With a slight hesitation however, Treynor persisted. "If the mountains were so safe then how were the Sanguen people able to survive out in the open forests?"

At that moment in time Treynor swore he could hear his own heartbeat, as well as take note of how fast it had just sped up. As Mrs. Lyr's chalk hit the ground he realized perhaps he had gone too far this time. He had always asked too many questions that others didn't want to give the answers too. Without even turning around Mrs. Lyr addressed the class.

"You will all turn to page 183 of The Great Mountain Tribes and read until I get back. Treynor, you will be coming with me."

This wasn't his first time in the school administrator's office but as he walked with Mrs. Lyr something in her demeanor seemed very different. Upon turning the last corner he steeled himself for what was about to come. His parents would be called, there would be a long talk, and he would have to go home to another two weeks of nothing to do. Whenever he got in trouble his parent's seemed to think the worst punishment was just making him do nothing for two weeks and boy were they right. It drove him crazy to just sit inside while everyone else was outside playing and wrestling. Caught in his own daydream about the next few weeks he barely noticed they had walked past the administrator's office until they were practically outside.

Treynor was quite confused on where she was taking him. Did they have a super secret room where really annoying kids were locked up? Was he going to never be heard from again? He still had so many questions to ask his future teachers. It wasn't until they turned a corner and an unmistakable building loomed in front of them that he realized his fate was far more serious.

Approaching the Grand Protectorates Hall, Treynor knew he was doomed and would give anything to go back in a time and tell his future self to just stop asking questions. While most people avoided the building for reasons of bureaucracy and waiting in line, Treynor had a much more important reason not to be here during school hours.

Mrs. Lyr walked them right through the atrium, past the guards and into the meeting hall where the council could be heard discussing something rather dull.

Treynor thought maybe he'd get lucky today, maybe she was out on assignment? Perhaps she had to go crush some Sanguen skulls? But as they reached the final step and the council came into full view, the blood drained from his face as he noticed his mother, the only female on the council, sitting next to the Grand Protector.

"But we can't afford for trade with Thelkin to be interrupted!", shouted one council member.

"You'd rather we send half our first legion to defend the route?", retorted another.

"Enough!", bellowed Treynor's mother, "We shall send word to Thelkin and ask them to consider a different route that doesn't go through Sanguen lands, and if they insist on continuing that way, they will be responsible for the losses."

Halfway through her sentence she noticed their small audience and signaled for Mrs. Lyr to have a seat with Treynor.

“Sir, that was the last of the issues today before you’re to be at the training facility to speak to the graduating class. Was there anything else you’d like to address?”, she asked the Grand Protector.

Turtak Ukani, a Kalgu warrior of 110 years sat hunched in his chair. Upon death the Kalgu turned to stone and Treynor was certain Turtak would crumble to the ground any minute.

With a voice that reverberated off every surface in the hall he replied, “Meeting adjourned.”

With a deep bow the council left Turtak with an assistant until their meeting after lunch. To be so old you needed an assistant seemed odd to Treynor, in a society that values strength over everything else why keep someone so old around? The question was short lived however as his mother, the second highest ranking on the council and easily the most terrifying at the moment approached.

Eldona cut an imposing figure, towering well above most Kalgu warriors and wielding even the largest of their weapons with one hand. And while her stories on the battlefield were the material of many a bardic tale, it was her parenting abilities that now struck fear into her prey.

“Well this is quite the surprise Mrs. Lyr,” Eldona said, “I wasn’t expecting to see you until this evening at Eleni’s ceremony.”

With a smug glance down at Treynor, Mrs. Lyr replied, “That was the original plan, until Treynor started asking too many questions regarding the Crux and our origin.”

“Really,” started Eldona, “well a little curiosity never hurt anyone.” With that she added a quick wink to Treynor.

Was this really happening he thought? Was his mom actually taking his side? Normally he’d be grounded for two weeks by now, but today it seemed as though his luck may change.

Completely miffed Mrs. Lyr retorted, “You as well as anyone should know what happens when a student asks questions and isn’t prepared for the trials ahead of them.”

And at that Treynor noticed his mothers out of character jubilation shift back to her normal stony demeanor.

“Is that so,” She shot at Mrs. Lyr, “I do believe this meeting is over. You can leave Treynor with me. You should get back to your class, they may start to QUESTION where you are.” That last bit coming off a bit more threatening than intended.

At that Mrs. Lyr pushed Treynor forward and backed out of the room before picking up a brisk pace back to her class, who were in fact beginning to wonder where she had gone.

Curious where he ended up in this whole situation, Treynor tried to speak to his mom as they walked towards her training quarters.

“So how was your meeting today?” He inquired.

Holding up her hand and signaling for him to stop she replied, “Not now, not today. I was in a good mood due to Eleni’s graduation, and I’m going to pretend the meeting with Mrs. Lyr just didn’t happen.”

They began walking again.

And yet again curiosity got the better of him. “So no punishment?”, Treynor inquired.

“Two weeks,” Eldona replied without missing a single beat.

Hanging his head defeat, Treynor finished the walk back to her training quarters where he watched his mother go through her daily routines. It was at this moment that he wondered how Eleni was fairing on her last day of training, she never was as good as mom with a weapon.

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Eleni’s lecture had finally dismissed and all four hundred of her grade dispersed into the massive open air training ground that made up the center of the facility. Weapons training was about to begin and students began stretching and warming up.

But today was different. Or at least it felt different. This was the last day Eleni would be in this training hall as a student. She would either die in the next few weeks or come back victorious and join the ranks of the Protectors. She was rather skeptical of her skills to accomplish that however.

While her classmates were overly prepared in every weapon the Kalgu trained with, and able to crush most rocks with their bare hands, Eleni had only primitive mastery of the basic weapons. But what she lacked in sheer strength, she made up for with agility and cunning, which unfortunately for here weren’t traits the Kalgu admired or lauded.

As she contemplated her near future, a commotion towards the front of the training grounds could be heard. The entire council entered and took their seats on the platform that overlooked the combat grounds. She could see Turtak, in his last year as Grand Protector and soon to become another city guardian. And her mother, Eldona, stood on his right side. And was that Treynor behind her? She couldn't be sure at this distance but she swore she could see her little brother up there and was quite curious about what he had done to get kicked out of class again.

"Today is the last day you can seek our guidance on the road that lies ahead of you," Turtak boomed, his calm, resonant voice echoing off the stone walls so as to be heard in all corners of the hall.

"You will be given tonight to spend with your family and to prepare for your journey," bellowed the Grand Protectorate, "and tomorrow morning the gates will open at dawn for you to begin your test."

"Tomorrow you will leave the city, travel to the Kifu forest to the South and engage a Sanguen warrior. Those that are able to best their opponent and return with the staff of their fallen enemy will become Protectors of the city!" encouraged Turtak, "But... those who are unable to defeat a Sanguen warrior face to face shouldn't bother returning to the city at all."

While the first remark was instantly met with cheers and roars of applause, they were just as quickly squelched by the following remark. Every Kalgu in attendance knew of at least one family member or close friend who never returned or worse yet had a family return unsuccessful.

The Grand Protectorate continued, "Today you receive your final pieces of training before you are ready to undertake this milestone in your life, one that you alone control the final outcome of. Our enemies say you are too young for such a task, that twelve year olds shouldn't be put up against adult warriors from another world. But each and every Protector in this room is evidence that it not only makes us stronger as individuals, but invincible as a nation!"



With his last remark the outburst was uncontrollable as the Protectors to be stood up and started to break off into their training groups for their last day. Eleni wasn't as easily excited. Due to her unique talents she was never much of a fighter and preferred to stay in the background, which tended to clash with the duties and roles of a Protector. As she ambled towards her training group she wondered how she'd fair against a Sanguen warrior one on one. Looking up two things stuck out in her mind. Firstly their normal instructor, an older Protector known for dirty fighting and winning at any cost, had been replaced by a very stiff and rigid Protector known for being overly textbook and emphasizing analysis of Sanguen tactics. Secondly she found it odd that of all days, Namus had been assigned to her group. Kalgu are assigned different groups everyday to keep them from forming alliances or bonds with one another. This is meant to prepare them for one on one conflicts at anytime should the need arise. But Namus and her had been in a group last week, the odds of that happening again so soon were astronomical.

"Today we will be reviewing Sanguen forest tactics before training," commanded their new instructor. "How do they fight in the forest?"

"They always travel solo and fight one on one because they view anything else unfair for their opponents," answered one ambitious classmate.

"Correct. What is their weapon of choice?" Asked the instructor.

"Gidri, but occasionally they use slings or throwing spears," answered another. Upon Gidri being mentioned Eleni's attention was piqued. Not a lot was known about the mysterious staff wielded by the Sanguen. Perhaps this instructor could fill in a little more than the last. Raising her hand Eleni thought over the question in her head.

"What is your question?" The instructor asked stiffly.

"Well, it's about the Gidri...what exactly is it?" Asked Eleni hesitantly.

Answering as if he were a talking textbook the instructor replied, "It is the staff that all Sanguen carry with them from birth. It is also the staff you must take upon killing them to create your Protector's Hammer."

"I know that, but what is it? Where does it come from," Eleni asked persistently.

"It's their staff. They all have one, which is why it's their primary weapon," reinforced the instructor.

"But why can our birth stone meld with it?" she asked, referring to the stone that all Kalgu were born with. She had often wondered why and how Kalgu were literally born from the stone, but what made even less sense was how their birth stones could mysteriously meld with the Sanguen's staffs to make a very formidable weapon.

“It is simply the way nature works. Our job is to protect and not to question,” Replied the instructor, bordering on anger, “Any other questions pertinent to today’s training.

Having received nothing new from her first exchange with the instructor Eleni chose to keep her questions to herself the rest of the day, hoping they’d sort themselves out eventually. The rest of the lesson went on in a rather mind numbing fashion. At one point some excitement ensued when Namus tried arguing with the instructor about something that was supposedly taught the year before but even that was short lived. After a long day and a reminder of tomorrow’s the class was dismissed for the day to get some rest and spend time with their families.

## Chapter 2

As the students exited the training hall Eleni was joined by her younger brother and mother for the walk home.

“I can’t believe you’re going to take the test, Eleni. Can you believe that anyone as bad at fighting as you is ready for the Test of Stone? Do you think you’ll pass?” Rambled her brother. “I have faith in you and all, as your brother, but as a non objective third party, I have my doubts. Plus brother is betting you won’t return. I said that wasn’t nice but he assured me it was a safe bet. So...are you planning on bringing me back anything?”

As Eleni was walking in silence with her family, she realized she had already thought about everything Treynor was saying. She wasn’t the best fighter, and she certainly wasn’t the strongest. What she lacked in strength and skill she made up for in cunning and guile, but to her classmates that just made her weak and strange. Ultimately she wasn’t sure if she could pass the test.

“Is your brother bothering you again?” asked Treynor’s mother. “Don’t worry about the test, just take it one step at a time. After tonight you will be thinking clearly and be able to handle any obstacle.” she reassured Eleni.

“I think she will do just fine. Even if she isn’t the biggest or strongest, and can’t fight very good. She will do better than Greylig ever did and make him lose his money from the stupid bet.” Chimed in Treynor.

“Where is Greylig by the way?” Asked Eleni. “I figured he would have wanted to gloat and tell me all the ways I would fail.”

Hesitant to even talk about her eldest son, Eldona quickly changed the subject.

“So what do you want to eat before having to scavenge for the next two weeks?” She asked.

Seeing that her mother didn't want to talk about her older brother she just went along with the topic change. Walking back to the house they discussed many topics, including the weather, the new addition to the city and most uncomfortably, how she planned on killing her first target?

“Well I'm not quite sure yet,” Answered Eleni “, I mean there's a good point in saying my birth stone will help a lot but at the same time, mom does make a valid argument for using my bare hands.” She remarked just trying to play along with the conversation at this point. Hoping it would end upon reaching their house she was rather disappointed after rounding the last corner.

Standing outside the house and looking rather gaunt was her older brother Greylig. A very large Kalgu wearing only a pair of pants and sandals, her brother was an imposing figure even in his state of malnutrition. With a lengthy scar running from his left temple to his right hip, he looked equally grisly. His eyes were the only part of him that looked alive. A deep purple, and on fire with animosity towards his younger sister, what if Eleni finished what he failed all those years ago?

“Well I think you could definitely just riddle them to death. Or perhaps it would be more effective to trick them into thinking you're their ally, and stabbing them in the back at night!” Chided Greylig.

“Enough,” Shouted their mother “Eleni would never stab an enemy in the back, and you of all people have no right to speak to her that way. While you rot away in the house all day she has the potential to redeem what little family honor you haven't pissed away the last 8 years!”

After a few moments of tension Greylig stormed off and disappeared into the nearby tavern.

“Just ignore him, “ commented his mother ,” You know he doesn't mean it. It can't have been easy for him to make the choice he was forced to make. But one day he will come to terms with what he had to do and will regret what he's said to you over the last few years.”

Hearing the commotion outside, Eleni's father emerged from the house. Her father was a Maji, born of gemstone and had never left the city walls let alone had to battle a Sanguen. Despite her father's preference for being a homebody, he was the chief Archon at the Maji Academy and could wipe out an entire legion of Sanguen Berserkers with the bat of an eyelash. And yet there she was, the daughter of the Chief Archon and the soon to be Grand Protectorate, and she could barely finish her morning workout with the rest of her class.

Her father grabbed a jug of ale from the house and handed it to Eleni, "I know you're not technically old enough until tomorrow, but..."

"But you want to have a drink with me in case I don't come back..." Added Eleni.

After a moment of silence she smiled and shared a drink with her family. Eleni was fully prepared to not make it back, it wasn't death or failure that scared her, it was letting down her family after what they had already suffered through that was more than she could bear. While contemplating this something sharp poked her leg.

"Ouch!" She said startled. Looking down she noticed Treynor poking her with a stick

"Where did you get that?" She asked.

"I sold my toys to buy it so we could train one last time before you leave. Everyone in school says a stick fighter is way different than how we fight and that sometimes not being prepared for the different style can make a big difference. So, I sold my toys and bought a stick. I've had it for a week and I think I'm getting pretty good with it." He rambled.

Eleni laughed, "Well I can't argue that they fight a little differently but I think that's the least of my worries, I just want to enjoy ton-,"

He poked her again, this time a little harder.

"Stop it," She said, "Don't make me take that from you."

They started to play fight back and forth as mom and dad watched.

"You're not half bad at being a Sanguen, perhaps you should have been born in the forest!" Goaded Eleni.

"Take that back!" Shouted Treynor, as he pressed the attack a little harder.

As he was on the offense Eleni started to realize that this was a terrible idea. Even though Tryenor was 4 years younger than her, at the age of 8 he still fought better than most of her graduating classmates. As the fight progressed she found herself on the defensive more than the offensive and in one swift move she was on the ground with the sharp end of Treynor's toy stick against her throat.

“While I may be good with a stick, I’m even better with a rock and would never want to live in a stupid forest,” Said Treynor, not fully comprehending what had just transpired.

Eleni, batting away the stick, stumbled to her feet and walked inside past her parents, both grasping for something to say to their daughter, possibly one of the last things they’d say to her.

As the sun rose the next morning, peaking over the sandstone cliffs to the east, Eleni laid basking in the sun on top of their house. She was unable to sleep last night and found comfort in the darkness atop their roof. While the open design of Rithklern wasn’t very convenient in the raining months, during the darkest nights it felt liberating to blend in amongst her surroundings. Atop their roof she felt protected from prying eyes wondering how the daughter of the Chief Archon and the Grand Protectorates advisor would fair on the coming day.

As the sun rose higher and people began to stir she felt uncomfortable being so exposed and nimbly jumped from the roof onto the patio below. She heard the fifth horn of the morning and knew she had one short hour left with her family. When she headed inside she found her mother making breakfast and her father giving Treynor a quick lesson on etiquette, something he rarely got from his mother. She overheard the conversation including how to act during a mock fight the day before someone undertakes the Test of Stone.

It was a very quick and uncomfortable hour, breakfast being consumed in silence; preparations and packing were completed without a word being uttered. With just a few things left Eleni realized she was going to the test without her older brother seeing her off, and quite frankly she was okay with that.

Her brother was known to disappear for days on end and come back looking worse off than when he left. Normally he was spotted throughout the city with updates being sent back to his parent about his whereabouts, someone who fails the Test of Stone isn’t to be left unattended in the city. But other times he slips the guards and comes back at night when only Eleni is awake and in the shadows of the roof.

On those nights Eleni has noticed things that she’s told no one else. Things Greyllig possesses that cannot be obtained within the city. She always figured it’d be more trouble than it’s worth to make a fuss about it, but with today possibly being her last she really wish she knew what it was that her brother had always brought back.

“Are you ready?” Asked her mother, startling her from her contemplation.

“As close as I’ll ever be.” Replied Eleni.

“Take care of yourself.” Added her father.

“And bring me back a Sanguen toy.” Added Treynor. His ability to be a complete child one moment and best her in a fight the next still baffled Eleni, but she resolved herself to bring him back a toy if she had the opportunity, for his sake more than hers.

After a few brief hugs she turned around and walked down the long road to the gates, the gates that would lead her out of the city that had been her home for the last 12 years. The same gates that start the Test of Stone and the same gates that will not open for her again until she comes back with a Sanguen staff.

As the gates slowly came into sight she started to think about all the possible ways she would be physically capable of actually taking out a Sanguen warriors. Maybe she’s get lucky and find one who’s actually a worse fighter than her, unlikely but possible. Perhaps she and another student can fight two Kalsanguen’s and she could just pick the best warrior as her partner.

Despite this being a violation of the Sanguen’s battle ethics she deemed it her best option and was hoping Namus would agree to such an arrangement.

As she was thinking and walking towards the gates, something quickly jerked her into a pitch black alleyway. After her eyes adjusted she realized it wasn’t something, but someone, her older brother to be precise.

“If you do as you have been taught, you will die before you have a chance to fight back,” Greylig stated coldly.

Taking it as another slight of her abilities, Eleni snapped back, “Just because you failed doesn’t mean I’ll follow in your footsteps!”

“It has nothing to do with me, but everything to do with you. You are not a Kalg warrior, you destiny does not lie there and nothing you can do can change that. If you fight with the tactics they have taught you, you will die.” Greylig stated a second time.

“Then what am I supposed to do? You think I want to live the life of an exile, or worse yet a failure? I see what every day of life does to you. You hate every minute of it.” Eleni stated.

“I don’t hate every minute of life; I hate every minute of life here.” Corrected Greylig, “And in regards to what you are supposed to do, I can only tell you to follow your intuition and at all times be receptive to the opportunities around you. I’ve seen you on top of the roof late at night when no one else knows you’re there. I know you have a talent that not many know of and fewer yet know you actively practice.”

The fact that Greylig had seen her on the roof all those times when she was certain know one could have known unsettled her, but even more unsettling was the mention of the other things she had practiced with the comfort of no one else knowing. How much did Greylig know?

Greylig continued, "I see in you what someone saw in me eight years ago, and I tell you the same thing I was told then. If you do as you have been taught by the Protectors, then you will die; trust only your intuition and perception of the space around you."

Greylig paused and looked into Eleni's eyes. The deep purple was rather unsettling to look directly into but for some reason she was unable to look away.

"But as your brother, your older brother who hasn't been much of a role model, I am going to give you something else as well." Greylig said solemnly.

He then reached into his cloak; something Eleni hadn't noticed him wearing despite it being rather odd for him to have any garment on his upper body that wasn't soiled with mead. He produced a small shell and handed it to Eleni. Living high in the mountains, far from any body of water besides the mountain springs, it was very uncommon to see or find a sea shell in this area. Aside from wondering where Greylig had gotten it, she was more concerned with why he was giving it to her.

As she studied it in her hand she noted it was rather pretty to look upon, a deep indigo color being the most predominant, a peculiar color for a shell Eleni noted. And although her knowledge of shells came solely from books and stories, she didn't believe she had ever seen or heard of one that looked quite like this. It was about the size of a common frog but had a very irregular pattern on it. In place of the usual smooth arcs and spirals was a zig-zagged pattern that appeared to be random and chaotic. For its apparent size it was remarkably heavy, perhaps the weight of shells three times its size. As she examined it closer she also noticed that it had very sharp edges, so sharp she cut her finger on the corner.

"So what does this do?" she asked her brother as she moved her finger to her mouth in an attempt to stop the bleeding, only to notice Greylig had disappeared without a trace.

Startled by what had just transpired and Greylig's ability to disappear, she stumbled back into the road leading to the city gates. She heard the sixth horn start to bellow, and she still had a quarter mile yet to run. Was it Greylig's plan all along to stall her so she'd miss the start of the test? As these thoughts mulled around in her head she took off down the street, coming to the end of the line just in time to be marked off the list and kicked out of the city.

Awaiting her outside was the most wondrous and terrifying view of her life. After 12 long years of living amongst solid rock the emerald forests that lay before her were truly something amazing to behold. They seemed to stretch on for miles and miles with patches of plains and valleys interspersed amongst them. Lazy rivers and creeks flowed idly through the forests, a beautiful azure against the foliage. Watching her classmates begin the two day ascent to the base of the mountain made her realize what lie before her.

Within two weeks she had to become accustomed to a new world, track someone known for being untraceable and kill that same person using skills and tactics she wasn't fully capable of performing. And all the while she had to decide what to make of the things her brother had told her, and what to make of this indigo shell in her pocket.

As she worked through these thoughts, she started down the mountain. A mere pebble amongst the four hundred plus graduates ambling down the mountain side. The only thing that made her stand out was the indigo shell she slowly stroked from within her pocket.

## Chapter 3

Eleni had hoped to run into Namus during her descent to ask for her help but despite actively looking for him there were just too many students to have any luck of locating a specific one. Namus was also known for his punctuality so he was probably among the first out of the city, perhaps if she got an early start tomorrow morning she could catch up to him.

As the first day started to wane she kept an eye out for potential camping spots. The graduates had been warned not to start a fire as four hundred small fires would attract the attention of Sanguen scouts who were known to track quite close to the city. But in a brand new world that felt very cold towards her, Eleni wanted to feel some warmth.

Her keen eye helped her find a small cave that twisted into the hillside above and well off the beaten path of the rest of the group. In her protected alcove she felt safe to start a fire and gathered enough kindling to get a small campfire going.

After a few minutes her relaxation was cut short as she heard some voices approaching her. It couldn't be Sanguen as they only travel solo, so she hoped it was at least some classmates she was on friendly terms with.



After a few moments three classmates turned the corner into her little cave and she didn't recognize any of them, so she figured this encounter could go either way.

"Nice little place you got here. Protected from the outside you're able to have a nice fire going. We wouldn't have even seen it if we hadn't noticed you gathering wood while it was still light." stated the biggest of the three. Eleni cursed herself for not being more careful, she was after all the most stealthy of her class when she tried to be.

Eleni replied, "Well you're more than welcome to join me tonight, there is plenty of room." She hoped she may turn this into an alliance of sorts.

"Doesn't look like there's enough room to us," answered the sole female of the other group.

The third added, "Especially for weirdo's that can't even make it through our basic training."

While she had no idea who they were, they obviously had noticed her back in school. Which also meant they knew she couldn't fight them off to protect her alcove, but she would have to at least try.

"Look, you guys can share the cave with me if you want, but I'm not leaving. I found it, I built the fire, and you can go sleep in the forest if you have a problem with that." She said with a slight fire in her voice.

At that, the large classmate smirked at his two friends and walked towards Eleni drawing a long dagger from his belt as he approached.

She was definitely not prepared to deal with a weapon in such close, and well lit, quarters. He must have come from a wealthy family to be carrying around a dagger. Most Kalgu only ever completed the Test with their birth stone in hand, metal being an extremely rare commodity among their tribe.

"Look I don't want to hurt you," Eleni partially bluffed. She could at least evade the big one, but the two friends might pose a problem.

"Oh, please hurt me," Taunted her attacker as he lunged forward, aiming the dagger right at her stomach.

In a quite flurry she deflected his blade to the side and run up the side of the cave wall landing on the other side of him. She attempted to push him into the fire but she greatly under estimated his mass and instead landed herself into the arms of his two goons.

She attempted to elbow the other guy in the face but he blocked it and grabbed her arm, while the female punched her in the gut with a quick follow up to the face. They pushed her backwards out of the cave abruptly.

Eleni stumbled back a few paces from the push, her eyes watering and her nose most likely broken.

“Thanks for the fire,” jabbed the large Kalgu as he sheathed his dagger and made himself comfy next to her fire. The other two laughed and began taking off their gear to relax for the night.

She turned and followed the curve of the cave out into the cold night air. As she made her way down the hill she looked over her shoulder to see the fire reflect her three enemies shadows on the wall. She could at least go to sleep knowing the idiots had stoked the fire too much and a Sanguen tracker may find them in the night.

Eleni woke with a start as he leg began to feel as though it were on fire. At first she thought she rolled into her fire, but the memories earlier that evening came crashing back as she rolled off her ledge onto the hard ground, her leg still burning.

She couldn't figure out what was causing her pain until she reached into her pocket and noticed the indigo shell was giving off a lot of heat. She didn't want to touch it but she had to get it out of her pocket. She grabbed it as quickly as possible and went to throw it but noticed it cooled immediately upon her touch.

She couldn't for the life of her figure out why Greylig had given this to her. As she began to pace back and forth trying to figure out what this shell did it started to vibrate on occasion. As she pointed herself up hill the shell would vibrate, but face any other direction and it was just a shell.

Curiosity getting the better of her she pointed the shell up the hill and began to follow the vibrations, which were getting stronger and stronger the further she backtracked. Was it taking her home?

It wasn't until she was almost at the entrance that she realized the shell was taking her to her alcove she was ousted from just hours ago. As she got closer she put her stealth skills to good use and approached the cave with caution.

Once she rounded the first corner and could see her three classmates fast asleep the shell stopped vibrating. What an odd trinket she thought.

Not knowing why it had brought her here she studied her classmates for a bit in the dark, their firing having reduced itself to just embers at this point.

Deciding to play it safe and not do anything she turned to leave, but the shell instantly started vibrating again, stronger than it had before.

Eleni stopped and looked at the shell and then back at her classmates, it seemed it was trying to tell her something. She remembered what her brother had told her about being receptive to all opportunities and to not take this test like her teachers had taught her.

Something else caught her attention while she pondered what to do next. Her classmates were rather sloppy with their gear placement in their stolen encampment. With the exception of the large one's dagger nothing seemed overly difficult to steal. As the thought crossed her mind the shell began to feel cool and pleasant to the touch. Was that what it wanted? For her to steal their gear?

Regardless of what the shell was trying to do, once she thought about it they deserved to have their stuff taken, being thieves themselves. She slowly approached the sleeping trio and quietly grabbed their three packs leaning against the wall.

She always got a rush out of being sneaky, but even more so when the offending party deserved it. And what better time than now to put her skills to the test.

As she approached the large one she steeled her resolve and deftly undid his belt which held the dagger.

The clasp made a slight noise, causing him to stir a bit in his sleep. She paused and stood motionless, like a cat waiting for its prey to forget it's even there.

After a few tense moment he seemed to fall back into a normal snoring pattern. She carefully lifted the end of his belt and raised the dagger into the air off of it. She tucked the dagger into her own belt and placed his belt back down.

Having taken all their gear except their clothes she quietly exited the cave and headed towards a cliff she noticed on her way downhill earlier. Upon reaching the cliff she tossed their three packs down a good 200 meter ravine. The dagger however posed a problem. it would be great to have in her encounter with the Sanguen. While she wasn't great with weapons, she was better with a dagger than her bare hands. But if those three caught up the dagger would be a dead giveaway of what she did.

After a few moments she had a brilliant idea. She rolled the top of her pants inwards so her belt was against her skin and threaded the dagger on it. She placed her shirt over the top and to the average viewer it appeared as though she were unarmed.

Pleased with herself she started downhill yet again. It was still a few hours before sunrise but the thrill of her latest engagement wouldn't allow her to sleep anymore. She also thought perhaps she could catch up to Namus, maybe the shell would even guide her to him.

## Chapter 4

As the sun slowly began to rise in the distance Eleni was beginning to realize just how far from home she was. The mountainous ground first gave way to frequent rocky outcroppings but even those were beginning to be few. The forest at first began as small trees battling for survival among the dense rock, but now she was entering an area of the forest where the trees were as tall as any building she had seen in Rithklern, perhaps taller.

Despite passing a few groups of classmates she was definitely among the first in the forest and used the increasingly dense tree cover to help glide between the trees, hopefully unseen. She hadn't seen Namus yet but knew she had to be getting close.

Right as the sun crested over the mountains way off in the distance she heard the muffled sounds of combat. She thought to herself

*Could it be? Is there actually a Kalgu fighting for their life up ahead?*

Briefly gripped by fear, her curiosity got the better of her and she snuck forward, trying harder than before to remain unseen.

As she approached the din of combat grew louder, at first just muffled grunts but as she got closer she could make out some words.

"You cowardly bastards! Fight me one on one!" Yelled a familiar voice.

As Eleni glanced around a rather large tree she recognized Namus as the Kalgu doing the yelling. And much to her shock he was facing off against three Sanguen warriors!

This went against everything they had ever been taught. Sanguen always fight one on one.

"You just wait, there are plenty more where I came from! You will die today!" Yelled Namus as he lunged forward. The Sanguen communicated in an unrecognizable tongue and coordinated their attacks, never letting Namus get the advantage.

As Eleni stood there she began to realize that she needed to help him or he wouldn't survive, but what could she contribute?

At that moment one of the Sanguen warriors turned their back towards her, and only a mere three meters away. As she tried to figure out what to do, her leg once again felt like it was on fire, the indigo shell burning quite hot.

Upon pulling it from her pocket it was once again cool and began to vibrate when she moved it closer to her body. As she moved it down her ribs and towards her waist it vibrated even more until it was almost bouncing out of her hand when she hovered over her stolen dagger.

Then she had an idea. She pulled the dagger out and the shell ceased its vibrations as she placed it back in her pocket. Lucky for Namus, knife throwing had always been her best subject in combat training; but she better hurry as he was quickly getting worn down.

Eleni took a slight step out from behind the tree and launched the dagger through the air at the Sanguen in front of her. Unlucky for her right as she let loose he lunged towards Namus, the dagger still hitting, just not where she intended.

Even more unlucky for her, it was that Sanguen's lunge that placed a spear right between Namus' ribs. As Namus slumped to the ground the Sanguen yelped in pain when the dagger hit his right shoulder, lodging itself deep in the joint. He quickly turned to look for his assailant but Eleni had been quicker.

Immediately after loosing the dagger she knew it wasn't going to drop her target and ducked behind the tree. She hoped it would distract him enough to help Namus out however and perhaps even out the battle. Namus could probably handle two on one.

As she heard the Sanguen yelp out in pain she ducked back a few trees in case one broke off to look for her. As she backed off she no longer heard the fighting sounds that drew her to this spot. Had her dagger disrupted the whole fight?

She glanced through some foliage to see two of the Sanguen walking in her direction through the trees. This meant good odds for Namus, one on one he was definitely going to win. All she had to do was hold them off a while longer.

But why couldn't she hear Namus fighting anymore?

Off to her left was a rather thickly wooded area with trees no more than half a meter apart from one another. She quietly sprinted over to them and deftly made her way halfway up them, almost ten meters off the ground. Unless Sanguen had an amazing sense of smell they weren't going to find her up here.

As she watched the two close in on her previous hiding spot, the one she daggered walked towards them, his shoulder in a sling and blood trickling down his side. At that moment her worst fears gripped tight.

As she watched them search around her fear become more and more paralyzing with each passing moment. She had waited too long to help. She could have thrown the dagger better. She could have just not been a coward and jumped into the melee. Did Sanguen take prisoners? Was there a chance he was still alive, already knowing the answer she sank further into the tree.

After what seemed like an eternity but was probably twenty minutes the Sanguen said some words to one another and walked off into the forest. As much as she wanted to immediately check on Namus she was concerned they were waiting for her to do just that.

Eleni sat in the tree for a good hour before finally slinking to the ground and heading towards the clearing where the skirmish had taken place. As she approached she braced for the worst and was met with it full force.

Namus was lying in the grass face down, stripped naked and had completely turned to stone; Eleni's stolen dagger resting on his granite back.

Seeing her first dead body ever was bad enough, but for it to be her only friend in the world was enough to break her. Sadness gave way to anger which gave way to rage. Not able to go within a few meters of his body she left the dagger and all and began tracking the vile creatures that did this.

It was unfortunate for them that tracking was the one area of standard Kalgu curriculum that Eleni excelled in, made even easier by the fact that one of them was bleeding.

She quickly picked up their trail and was on their heels as soon as one could hope for; her rage blinding her to the details of what she'd do once she found them.

After a few hours she finally caught up to them, she was impressed with the pace they made even with an injured party member. They had finally stopped to rest near a stream right around lunch time.

The injured Sanguen used the water to clean his wound and have his party member bandage it properly.

Eleni had learned a few things in the last couple hours tracking this group. First, she was far better at remaining unseen than she gave herself credit for. In the process of tracking these three she avoided five other groups of Sanguen.

Second, she noted that everyone of those five groups consisted of three warriors. Never one, never two and never four, always three. She no longer believed that Namus brought that upon himself, but that she had been lied to; that Namus had been lied to.

And lastly, that she had traveled far deeper into the forest than she had originally planned. Perhaps far deeper than any of her classmates had yet made it. In her rage she continually ignored the little voice in her head that warned her not to go any further, or about how dangerous it was out here.

Something about the rage freed her to not over evaluate and just navigate by instinct.

While watching the Sanguen go through their packs for lunch, she pulled out some dried roots and began to chew on them absent-mindedly.

From down stream a second group of three Sanguen approached and exchanged words with her quarry. Their language sounded so odd compared to Kalgu.

“Kiom vi renkontis hodiaŭ?” asked the one she wounded previously.

The approaching group answered “Ses”, and dumped out a small pouch of rocks onto the bank. “Kaj vi?”, their leader asked back.

“Ah, nur unu.” The wounded one said as he tossed a pebble onto the ground.

As Eleni observed she noticed that those weren't in fact just pebbles but Kalgu birth stones! The one her prey had just thrown down was Namus', which meant the other group must have killed six other Kalgu already this morning.

They continued to banter back and forth before waving goodbye to one another, and the fully healthy party headed back the way they came.

A few hours after lunch and her enemies were still just lounging around the stream chatting. Maybe this is why they only had one stone, because they were lazy she thought. While she's glad they weren't out killing her classmates, she couldn't help but think Namus got killed by the biggest group of underachievers; which did nothing but fan her rage again.

Just when she was beginning to wonder if they planned on doing anything the rest of the day one of them pulled a large roll from their pack and unrolled it on the bank. It appeared as though they were going to camp the night here.

As Eleni waited in the trees, they slowly started to build a semi-formal camp, placing their bedrolls in a triangle formation with a fire in the middle and their packs by their side, one of them even wrapping the strap around his arm.

In just the last half a day she learned more about the Sanguen than she had in her 12 years of schooling. All three carried spears and one an additional dagger, but she had yet to see this *Gidri* they taught so much about in school.

It wasn't until the first of the group decided to go to sleep that she saw it. He took his shirt off and in a long channel sewn into the spine of his shirt he pulled out a thin piece of wood.

Before going to bed he did some basic stretching and flexed the wood along with him, almost working it out as well. The *Gidri* was easily able to completely bend back on itself which would explain why she hadn't noticed it despite being a stick running the length of their spine.

As he laid down he pulled his *Gidri* in close and it seem to almost meld with his body, or perhaps it was just flexing along his form? She wasn't entirely sure.

The other two soon followed suit, one producing his *Gidri* from channel sewn into his belt and the other from his boot; where the *Gidri* had been coiled around his ankle all day.

It seemed quite odd to Eleni that they were always taught the *Gidri* was the most dangerous weapon the *Sanguen* had when in fact they went to great lengths not to fight with it it appeared.

But her issues with the *Kalgu* educational system could wait, her victims were about to fall asleep and give her a chance to....do....something.

It finally occurred to her that in all her anger and observation she never actually figured out what to do when given this opportunity. She could maybe take out one before the other two awoke and easily killed her. With the fire going she'd be an easy target.

She now greatly regretted leaving her stolen dagger on *Namus'* body, she could have possibly taken out all three if she had that. She looked for the weapons her enemies were carrying and noticed they had placed them under their bedrolls, somewhere even she couldn't easily get them.

Eleni also noticed that they hadn't set up a single perimeter despite knowing hundreds of *Kalgu* were roaming the forest looking to kill *Sanguen*. As she slowly approached their camp she reached the line where the grass and the river bank met.

Taking her first step on the bank the rocks made a stifled crunching noise under her foot and she quickly recoiled it.

Well that would explain why they hadn't set up a perimeter. There wasn't a single *Kalgu* out here that could get within 10 meters of them without them waking up and being fully armed.

Well at least they thought there wasn't a single *Kalgu* capable of that.



She quickly surveyed the bank and noticed there were the occasional large rock protruding out from the much smaller pebbles, and there appeared to be enough of them to help her out.

She took her first tentative step out on the closest one and not only did it not shift, but it made no noise at all.

Within a few moments she had made her way to within a few meters of their camp and was crouched down as low as possible to blend in with the darkness.

She could hear all three snoring and hoped that they hadn't been aware of her presence throughout the day.

Being just within a few strides of her targets and she became fully aware she wasn't going to be able to fight them. But she also remembered her entire purpose for being out here. While she may not be able to kill a Sanguen for their *Gidri*, she could definitely steal one.

Surveying the group he noticed that the one she had injured also slept the most haphazardly, perhaps because he didn't have full mobility of his shoulder. She crept from stone to stone until she right on the fire, now just embers glowing in the dark.

She circled the fire pit to within arms reach of the injured Sanguen. Being this close, close enough to touch one, to hear it breath made her heart skip and few beats and throw up a few pumps of adrenaline.

With delicate fingers she gently moved a few of his fingers and half his good arm to open a path for the *Gidri* to be removed. Reminding her of a game she played as a kid, she had to maneuver the stick from his clutches without touching the sides; only instead of a nasty shock, she would probably end up dead.

As she neared completion a thundercloud in the distance let out a loud clap causing her mark to startle a bit and rearrange how he slept. Standing stiller than any statue carved out of solid granite, Eleni paused for what seemed like hours.

After his breathing went back to normal she navigated the *Gidri* from beneath the rest of his grasp and let out a silent sigh of relief. As she made her way back to the edge of the encampment her leg began to burn.

Now familiar with the signals of the shell she pulled it from her pocket and quietly rotated around to see which direction it wanted her to go.

After just turning slightly it vibrated in the direction of the river but off to the side of the camp, not the direction she wanted to go but the shell hadn't led her astray yet.

She quickly plotted out a path on the larger stones and made her way towards the river. As she got closer the shell guided her to an unknown location in the dark.

Once its vibrations grew to their peak, the moonlight illuminated what it had been leading her towards. Laying there among the bank was seven Kalgu birthstones, each one as unique as the Kalgu they were taken from and wholly out of place among the smoothed river rock.

Her sadness at Namus' death washed over her once again but this time was a little less intense. She reached forward and scooped up the rocks, placing them in a pouch within a pouch on her belt. She could at least give these seven a proper burial when she returned home.

When she returned home she thought, not if anymore. In a twisted way, Namus did ultimately help her. The rage from his death spurring her on to do things she wouldn't normally have had the courage to do herself. Now she just had to make it back to Rithklern...through hours of forest.

She made her way back to the bank, grabbed her pack and headed towards home. About a half hour after she had departed she heard a blood curdling scream in a foreign tongue come from the campsite she had just left. The Gidri in her hand immediately became as straight as an arrow and as hard as granite, while emitting a faint hum.

She decided she probably couldn't take her time getting home and began to jog as she navigated the forest with an angry Sanguen on her tracks.

## Chapter 5

As the moonlight glinted off the various minerals in the stone, Eleni knew she was getting closer to her cities border and further away from the forest. She had ran for 20 hours straight now, only stopping to avoid detection or gather water.

The first night running from the Sanguen had been terrifying as every thirty minutes her pursuers would let out another blood curdling scream, but she slowly put more distance between them.

The further away she got, the less the stolen Gidri hummed, but it did however remain rigid and unbendable.

She hadn't heard the scream in a few hours and was almost home at the end of the third day out of the city; making the journey back twice as quickly.

When she felt safely within Kalgu territory she slowed her pace to allow herself to fully take in what had transpired. She didn't want to rush into the city as that may alert the council to how she acquired her prize.

Almost exactly twenty four hours after she had stolen the Gidri she was walking up the long path to Rithklern's entrance. After a brief hike up, the guards were startled to see her and at first asked if she had already given up.

Looking confident Eleni stated, "Of course not, I have already completed my task.", as she presented the Gidri.

The guards eyes got wide.

"No one has completed the task that quickly in almost a decade." said the first guard suspiciously, eyebrow raised.

The second guard reached out to check the Gidri, "It's definitely legit," he said as he looked it over.

The first guards suspicion instantly changed to amazement and a big smile as he added, "Welcome home, Protector."

With a hand signal to an unseen tower the gates behind them opened up and allowed Eleni to step back into her city after only being gone for three days. She was happy to be home, sad to without Namus and concerned about the next few days.

Unfortunately her test isn't over until the rest of the successful Kalgu return and they complete the melding ceremony as a group. Until then she has to keep up the facade that she killed a Sanguen and tell no one of what she saw. To question the Sanguen tactics now, after supposedly besting one, would mean certain exile.

As she made her way home she wondered where Greylig was and now, more than ever, wanted to hear about his test 8 years ago.

Luckily when she got home, her parents and Treynor were fast asleep. Knowing they would want to stay up all night and discuss her adventure, she just slipped into her bedroom window and went to sleep.

Eleni woke with a start as a small bundle of brother cannonballed on her bed with congratulations.

"I knew you'd be able to do it!" yelled Treynor, "I never doubted you for a minute." he added quickly.

After a few seconds her eyes adjusted and noticed he was still in his pajamas and she could hear her father cooking breakfast in the kitchen. Judging by the sun creeping through her window it had to be almost lunch time.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" She groggily asked.

“Yep, but when mom noticed you were home this morning AND saw the Gidri by your pack she told me I could stay home to celebrate, so Dad went to a meeting this morning but came home right after to make your favorite food AND I talked him into making some of my favorite food because I’m so happy for you AND they both said tonight we can do whatever you want to do AND that I shouldn’t bother you too much as you’re probably tired BUT I couldn’t wait any longer and it’s almost lunch time so I thought it was time to wake you up!” Treynor said excitedly in one long rambling, semi coherent statement.

“Well I’m awake, but I need to get dressed.” Said Eleni, “How about you go make sure dad is making EVERYTHING I really like, don’t let him get off easy.” She nodded suspiciously, implying her father might try to cut corners with the food.

Treynor’s eyes went wide as he nodded along with her and bolted out of the room.

Eleni plopped back down into bed for a few moments before standing up and stretching; during which numerous muscles screamed out that they weren’t happy with the non-stop pace the entire day before. She had a few bruises from bumping into something in the night but all in all she wasn’t too worse for wear.

Putting on some clothes she observed her Gidri briefly before picking it up and studying it closer. How did the guard know it was legit she wondered?

“Each Gidri is unique to the Sanguen it is born with. They have a design imprinted upon them that is as unique as the creature they belong to. They don’t look like a normal stick, nor anything someone could fake; but some have tried.” her mother said from the door.

Eleni, startled, looked up to see her imposing mother’s frame standing in the doorway.

“I’m so proud of you Eleni. I’m not proud that you had to kill, but I’m proud that you completed the task set before you.” Eldona continued.

This conversation made Eleni a little uncomfortable, but she didn’t want to give anything away so she remained calm.

“Now, I know you experienced things that don’t line up with what you’re taught in school, but you’re taught it that way to make you stronger. Even the Archon’s in the magic school don’t know what you and I, and every other protector in the city knows about the Sanguen,” Her mother said. As she turned to exit she added, “and the council prefers to keep it that way.”

As Eleni sat there taking in what had just happened she knew the graduates were set up to fail every year, that's why so few returned from the trials. The Sanguen weren't superior or stronger, the graduates just weren't properly prepared and then sent to the wolves.

As a small amount of anger boiled inside her she reflexively reached in and stroked the shell within her pocket and hoped Greylig would return soon.

After a hearty lunch Treynor decided he wanted to roam the city with Eleni while his friends were all in school. They both helped with cleanup and then headed outside, Eleni still stroking the shell in silence as Treynor rambled on.

"So what kind of weapon do you think your melding ceremony will result in? A hammer? A sword? A spear?" He excitedly questioned. He continued, "Someday when I have my melding ceremony I hope it's a giant hammer, bigger than even moms!"

At the end of the two weeks graduates were allotted, after all the successes returned home they would meet with the council and Chief Archon. Each of the successes would present their birth stone and the Gidri they obtained and through some kind of magic the Chief Archon would merge them into a weapon that the Protector would have with them the rest of their life.

If a Kalgu loses their birth stone, they eventually turn to rock and crumble; and after passing the Test of Stone, that is passed onto their gifted weapon. No one really knew how the weapon was chosen, or at least if they did they didn't tell anyone. After her encounter in the forest, Eleni began to question a lot she had learned in training. She realized Treynor was still talking.

"You're so lucky! You get to have mom AND dad present during your melding ceremony. Most kids don't have either parent there to watch it happen. I bet they're both so proud of you. OH! And Greylig owes me ten coins, he never actually agreed to the bet but I'm going to hold him to it!" Treynor exclaimed.

Her brother's ability to talk and never shut up sometimes annoyed Eleni, but today it just provided a white noise for her to think against.

Passing through the courtyard square they could see the gates out of the city, the gates that had changed her life twice.

Treynor's favorite store was just around the corner and he ran off in that direction while Eleni sat on the fountain in the center of the square waiting for him to return.

A loud rumble resonated from the direction of the gates and Eleni was shaken from the fountain and thrown to the ground as a loud, otherworldly roar pierced the air.

Sirens and alarms that she had never heard started going off, echoing off the rock and filling every corner of the city. People flooded from buildings trying to see what was happening, especially those old enough to have heard those alarms before.

“What’s happening?” Shouted Eleni, over the alarms, to an older Kalgu exiting a shop.

“Don’t know,” he remarked, “Last time I heard these I was a child and we were under attack.”

Almost on cue a tremendous branched hand crushed the front gates to Rithklern and trampled the guards standing nearby. The creature was enormous and filled the entire entryway to the city as it attempted to step inside. Luckily it was almost too big and had to start breaking away pieces of rock to make the hole large.

As it became visible everyone started to panic and flee the courtyard, if it made it’s way through the courtyard was the first place on it’s path of destruction.

Eleni stood there in shock, having never seen anything like this before her body didn’t know how to react but is getting increasingly dangerous to stand here. Large boulders were being flung from the rock around the gate and landing closer and closer as the creature made it’s way through what was left of the city entryway.

From behind Eleni a loud crack and crumble was heard that made her spin around on the spot to see something almost equally magnificent and terrifying.

Her father, the Chief Archon of Rithklern and arguably possibly the most powerful magic user among the Kalgu tribes, was standing outside the training facilities with a large blue light rushing from his body. The target was the two massive statues of Protectors long since dead.

As the light flooded over the statues they began to move, each motion like a warrior stretching after a long sleep. As they did so a cacophonous sound could be heard, like their joints were snapping back into place. After the first two were fully awake they started taking long strides towards the assailing tree.

After waking the first two, her father moved down the line of Protector statues, each one a larger than life statue of the Grand Protectors of old. Upon a Grand Protector dying the Chief Archon would embed their birth stone in their body, and morph them into a giant statue. Never fully alive again but not quite dead, ready to protect the city and their people if ever called upon.

As the first of the grand statues reached the tree it embedded it’s massive axe in the leg of the sentient tree, causing it to once again shriek and smash the statue against a side wall with enough force to send mountain everywhere.

Eleni had slid into an alleyway as the first of the statues had passed through courtyard square, watching from a semi-safe location.

Five total statues were now within striking distance of the tree and while they weren't equal to its size the statues maneuvered and fought like you'd expect a squad of Grand Protectors to fight. Standing behind all five was her father and a few other Archon's casting spells and firing into the melee.

Watching them move and slice as one unit was a sight to behold and Eleni along with everyone else in the street was mesmerized by the combat. With the tree mostly contained the large boulder's were no longer flying and this attack had turned into a spectacle, with the crowd cheering every time a massive branch was hacked off or a woody joint smashed to kindling.

As Eleni watched the monstrous melee her leg once again burned like someone lit a fire and she reached in a grabbed the shell wondering what it could possibly want right now.

As she pulled it out it once again cooled but wasn't vibrating immediately so she put it in her pocket again.

Instantly her leg was fire, this time more painful that she'd experienced so far.

Pulling the shell out again she pointed it in a bunch of different directions while still watching the fight, waiting for it to vibrate.

With her eyes on the combat and the stone pointed to her left, it began to vibrate. As she began to look that way, the massive tree caught one of the statues around the throat and with all its might threw it towards the courtyard square.

Her eyes locked on the flailing statue flying through the air, the stone began to vibrate so fiercely her hand was trembling. Looking in the direction it was pointed she noticed Treynor standing in the courtyard outside of his favorite shop.

Treynor was looking down at a wrapped present with Eleni's name written in big letters across the side, oblivious to the ever growing shadow engulfing him.

Realizing what the shell wanted, Eleni yelled at the top of her lungs, "TREYNOR!", and began to run towards him.

Her brother looked up at her, smiled, and was crushed beneath three thousand kilograms of granite before he could take a step.

The statue landing in the courtyard uprooted buildings, broke the fountain, and launched Eleni backwards five meters, knocking her out.

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Watching the massive tree lay seize to Rithklern from a far, high atop a mountain, Greylig hoped his family was OK.

He still questioned whether or not he did the right thing with Eleni, but in the back of his mind he knew she was more like him than like the rest of the Kalgu.

All he could do now was wait and see what came out of the city over the next few days.

## Chapter 6

Eleni woke up with a ringing in her ears and every muscle in her body ached from the force with which she hit the ground. As she stood up and looked out on the carnage the image of Treynor hit her harder than her impact with the ground.

As she stumbled towards the downed statue, now broken into many pieces, she glanced towards the gates and saw the massive tree finally felled and burning. The stone Protectors were walking back towards their pedestals and the Archons, including her father were headed this way.

When she reached the fallen statue there was no sign of Treynor. She thought and hoped it was just an illusion, that he had been on the far side and was just thrown backwards.

Her father reached her and inquired, "Eleni! What are you doing out here? Are you ok?"

All she could do was lean on him and cry.

"What's wrong?" He asked, "Are you hurt?"

Through her tears she shook her head and managed to point at the chest of the statute and mumble, "Treynor."

A look of fear and understanding washed over her father's face as he called over a few other Archons. He sat Eleni down on what used to be the fountain and together with the others they used their magic to lift the massive chest and set it down off to the side.

Where the chest was there now was a massive dent in the rock, and from Eleni's view point she couldn't see into it. Her father took a few careful steps forward before dropping to his knees and crying into his hands. Two of the other Archons carefully crawled in the crater and carried out Treynor's small, crushed body.

After a few consoling words, the other Archon's dispersed and headed to their tower to discuss what had transpired today.



Her father quietly stood up, scooped Treynor in his arms and made the long quiet walk back to their house, Eleni not far behind.

Eldona came home in a rush after hearing that her family was at ground zero of the attack. When she entered she was greeted by Treynor's body on the table, already beginning to crumble. Eleni and her father were sitting at the table in silence, not sure what to say.

Even her stoic nature couldn't keep her from bursting into tears at the site of her youngest child dead. She walked up to his body, cradled his head and gave him one last kiss on the forehead before pulling a blanket over his body.

"What happened?!" She demanded a little more forcibly than she intended. She looked at her husband who nodded towards Eleni.

Eleni could feel both her parents gaze on her and answered in a whisper, "We were just walking through the square....and Treynor...wanted to go into a shop....", she paused and took a few deep breathes and stifled more crying.

"I waited for him on the fountain and that's when the attack happened." she said. The tears were beginning to well in her eyes again as she had to retell the story.

"After the Protector statues appeared to have it under control, everyone was just watching the fight.....everyone except Treynor. The tree threw one of the Protectors at the square right as Treynor exited the shop.....he didn't even know the fight was happening." As the story continued her mother's jaw began to loosen and tears swelled.

"I looked over to see him engulfed in the shadow of the statue and only had a chance to yell his name before he was...before he was..." She couldn't finish the sentence and broke into sobs.

Her mother leaned over and placed her hand around Eleni's hand and consoled her while her father stood up and joined in the hug.

Pulling away slightly, Eleni said, "He went into the store to buy me a gift, for passing the test." before breaking into tears again.

After everything that had transpired in the last 72 hours Eleni wanted to sleep for a week and just avoid everything and everyone. Unfortunately for her no such reprieve was in sight.

A few hours after the ordeal at the square, Eleni was laying in bed when there was a knock on the door. She heard one of her parents get out of bed downstairs and answer it.

“Evening Chief Archon, I’m sorry to bother you after what happened this morning. But your presence along with your wife and child Eleni are required by the Grand Protector and the council immediately.” said an unknown voice from the doorway.

Hearing this Eleni got out of bed and headed to the stairs so she could better hear the conversation.

“I buried one of my children a few hours ago, I do believe the Grand Protector will understand if my family doesn’t feel like meeting right now.” Eleni’s father said with more coldness in his voice than she had ever heard.

The messenger continued, “I understand, as does Turtak, but he said it is a matter of grave importance and in regards to the attack. He said Eleni’s melding ceremony is to be completed today.”

Hearing that made Eleni’s heart instantly speed up. They never have melding ceremonies before all the successful graduates return, it’s unheard of. Why would her melding ceremony be of grave importance she thought?

Her father glanced up the stairs at Eleni, a look on his face that said he feared this was going to happen. “Grab your *Gidri* and let’s go. I’ll inform your mother.” Looking at the messenger, he added, “We’ll be there shortly.”

Eleni slowly walked to her room, thoughts swirling in her head so quickly she couldn’t focus on a single one. She changed clothes, grabbed the stolen *Gidri* and headed downstairs.

As she reached the bottom her father was whispering something to her mother, who gave Eleni a very bracing look.

“Let’s go.” Eldona stated coldly as she walked past Eleni and out the door.

A long walk to the training center was made all the worse by it being painfully quiet between the three of them. Her parents seeming to know something she didn’t and Eleni being too afraid to ask.

She didn’t understand what she possibly could have done to provoke this treatment, from the Grand Protector or from her parents. Not only had she completed the test, but she did it in record time. And with all her family was going through, this seemed very out of place.

The group of three reached the doors to the training hall and immediately upon entering took a sharp right turn down three flights of stairs, an area Eleni didn’t even know existed.

As they reached the bottom in silence, her father swung open a pair of doors with a flick of his wrist allowing them to enter.

The entire council was there and in the center of the room rose a pedestal of gemstone seemingly carved out of the ground and extending deep into the earth.

Her mother took her place at the right side of Turtak, a look of concern on his face. Her father stood off to the side of the room directly in line with the pedestal.

"I'm sure you're wondering why you've been summoned." Began Turtak in his low, booming voice. He continued, "Normally a melding ceremony would take place among your peers, something for you all to celebrate together. But it has come to the councils attention perhaps your melding won't go as smoothly as the others, so rather we do this in private."

Turtaks's comment sent the hairs on Eleni's back on end. What did he mean? Why wouldn't it work? What was going to happen to her?

Looking to her father, Turtak motioned towards the pedestal and said, "Proceed."

Eleni's father looked at her with vacant eyes and signaled for her to come over to the gemstone pedestal.

"Place your birth stone and Gidri here, and place both hands here." He said while pointing to a few spots among the gemstones.

Doing as she was instructed, Eleni looked around the room into the eyes of the council. Some wore looks of curiosity, others anger and some indifference. Her mother was watching every move with immense interest and looking for something, Eleni just wasn't sure what.

As soon as the items and her hands were placed her father pulled out his birthstone, a bright blue sapphire and held it above the items. He whispered a few words and blue light shot from the sapphire bathing her birth stone and the Gidri in it.

After a few moments nothing happened and the light retreated back to the sapphire. Her father looked at her with disappointment.

"AGAIN!" demanded Eldona, looking at Turtak. "Sometimes it doesn't work on the first try, it's happened before."

Turtak took a furtive look at Eldona before nodding to the Archon to try a second time.

Again, he held his sapphire above the pedestal and uttered a few words before the bright blue light bathed everything in it's power. The light was much brighter this time and you could see her father was pushing the magic much harder this time around.

After a few moments of nothing happening he said the spell again and the entire room was engulfed in blue, but the direct beam hitting the pedestal. Eleni's birthstone began to vibrate a bit but nothing more happened.

Her father abruptly ended the spell before stumbling back a few steps, exhausted from the extra effort, melding two magics wasn't easy.

Eleni looked around frantically like a confused animal, "What does that mean?! Why didn't it work?" She asked as she looked each council member in the eyes again. They all looked to Turtak this time.

"Because you stole it." Answered Turtak matter of factly.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Eleni pleaded. She continued, "I was just told to go retrieve a Gidri and I did."

"You see," started Turtak, "you were actually told to kill a Sanguen and take their Gidri. But when you stole yours you left it alive, and it then attacked our city just a few hours ago and killed your brother."

A look of confusion washed over Eleni, not understanding any of this. Her parents seemed to understand and both looked away at the mention of Treynor.

Turtak continued, "Like your birth stone, the Gidri is not only magical but tied to their owner and a conduit to the magic of our planet. When you kill the Sanguen, you can harness the magic of the Gidri and forge a marvelous weapon by combining it with your birth stone. However, when you steal a Gidri the Sanguen you take it from goes crazy for entire day looking for it, and the Gidri wants to be found. You no doubt heard it humming, calling to its master. Well after a day of searching, the Sanguen goes into a trance like state, non responsive to the world around them. After a while in that trance, somehow their Gidri uses it's magic to transform them into what attacked our gates this afternoon. Now if it is reunited with its Gidri while in that form, it reverts back to it's previous self. But if it's killed, the Gidri's magic drains away and becomes a fancy stick. Much like the one you have in front of you."

Hearing all of this hits Eleni like a hammer to the head as she realizes she's responsible for the damage inflicted on the city, the deaths of the guards, the Protectors that were lost and the death of Treynor.

A moment of profound silence passes and Eleni says, "Why don't you tell us this? What could be gained from keeping it a secret?"

Turtaks says, “The Protectors is an elite unit, only the strongest of Kalgu are cut out for it. Now most Kalgu who steal a Gidri are slain by the Sanguen they took it from, how you evaded that fate is more than curious. But more importantly, to be a Protector you have to want to kill Sanguen, not steal from them. So the council has deemed the Gidri-Sanguen relationship unimportant curriculum for your test.”

Hearing this, the anger begins to well up inside Eleni again, “Sort of like how you train us to fight one on one despite knowing the Sanguen always fight in groups of three?”

Turtak lets out a curt smile, “Yes, sort of like that. My job is to protect this city and my people, and every Protector who walks through those gates a success I know can take out three Sanguen. Not because they got lucky, not because they were trained in three on one tactics, but because they are the best fighters our city has. You’d think with your pedigree your family would have better odds, but so far they’re 0 for 2.”

That last comment hurt not only Eleni, but her parents both visibly looked away.

“You’re a murderer! You send us out to die!” Eleni yelled.

“I’M A PROTECTOR!” Boomed Turtak so loudly a few cracks formed in the walls. “And I will not have my city destroyed because some miscreant thinks our ancient ways are unfair.” He pauses to adjust his robes after his outburst. “Now, I can’t blame your parents. Normally your penalty would be death. We’d take your birthstone and throw it down the mountain and you after it. But your parents have suffered enough at you and your vagrant brother’s hands.”

Eleni was afraid to look her parents in the eye this time. First Greylig failing the test and now she not only failed, but got her youngest brother killed in the process.

Turtak continues, “So, the only option at this point is to banish you and permanently banish that brother of yours. If either of you are seen in Rithklern after today you will be killed on site.” As a matter of finality he pounded his staff on the ground sending shockwaves throughout the room. “Take your stone and get out of my city.”

Turtak turned and exited through an unseen door while the rest of the council filed out around the pedestal and Eleni.

With just Eleni and her parents in the room she looked at the pleadingly but they both took a deep breath, swallowed hard and exited the room. Eleni reluctantly grabbed her birth stone and exited as well, her stolen Gidri remaining on the gemstone pedestal.

Walking home made the walk to the facility seem like a vacation. The tension in the air was almost tangible, it became its own monster full of anger, sadness, fear, deceit, disappointment and many other negative emotions none of the group could verbalize.

As they reached their house it was dinner time and Eleni wasn't sure if she was allowed to stay or had to leave right away. She wasn't sure how her parents would react once they were inside.

Upon walking inside Eldona went straight to the bedroom and slammed the door. Tears and things breaking could be heard through the door as all the emotion she held in over the last hour came pouring out.

Eleni looked to father, not sure what to do.

In a voice that was the softest she had heard all day, he said, "Go pack your things and pack light. Meet me down here in fifteen minutes." And he turned and went to the bedroom.

Well that was it she guessed, she had fifteen minutes to say goodbye to the house she was raised in. To say goodbye to the city she had only been outside of once in her short life. And only fifteen minutes left with her parents, the two people in the world she didn't want to disappoint, but who she ended up ruining the lives of.

She had no idea what to pack for life outside the city so she grabbed a pack and put a few changed of clothes in, an extra pair of shoes, a bedroll and all the coins she had in her room. She wasn't sure if merchants outside of the city took coins, but it was worth a shot. She grabbed a bit of dried meat and fruit she had resting on her dresser.

Eleni grabbed her jacket, made sure the shell was still there, and took one look around her room before exiting and closing the door. Before she went downstairs she walked past Treynor's room and looked inside for the last time but it just wasn't the same without his energy there.

She worried what would happen to her parents, going from two children in the house to none overnight, and neither leaving in a good way. She slowly made her way downstairs right as her father exited the bedroom. He had changed clothes into something a little less formal and looked a little more composed than before.

"Can I say goodbye to mom?" Asked Eleni.

"Your mother is...in a bad place right now. She doesn't want to speak to you, or me for that matter." Her father said. "I will walk with you to the gate, do you have everything you need?"

All Eleni could manage at this point was a nod, so she and her father exited her house and headed down the street, Eleni glancing back one last time.

As they reached the gate, she was impressed with how much stone the Archon's had moved after the battle and there were only a few pieces of wood left. The gate wasn't anywhere near rebuilt, but there was a small passageway out of the city.

Once outside of the gates her father stopped and turned to face her. He said, "I want you to remember that we will always love you. We even still love Greylig. But this was your fault, and unfortunately there are consequences for our actions. I don't agree with the Council. I never have and I never will, but for better or worse, they run the city."

Eleni was briefly taken aback by this but quickly asked, "Does mom agree with them?"

"Mom is...conflicted." Her father said, "She used to agree with them 100%, that's how she rose in the ranks so quickly. But after we got together, I started rubbing off on her. She started questioning more and now she loves being a part of the Protectors but doesn't always agree with them. But at the same time she thinks they do very important work so she remains quiet."

He paused to compose his next thought, "Sometimes I blame myself for you and Greylig. I'm always questioning, it's the only way to understand magic, but I worry that rubbed off on you and your brother. And questioning is not the way of the Protectors, they are meant to follow." As he finished he began to tear up a little.

Eleni leaned forward and embraced him in a hug and said, "Don't you blame yourself. The council is wrong, they send other Kalgu's kids out to die on some misguided ancient tradition." She pulled back and looked him in the eyes, "I'm extremely sorry Treynor is dead and I'll regret that my whole life, but I'm glad I'm not part of the Protectors."

Her father pulled her close one last time before holding her at arms length. He reached into his pocket and produced a size-able handful of coins and put them in her pack.

"Now, steer clear of the forest as best you can and any other graduates you come across. The test is still going on and no need for others to know what happened." Her father said. "Kalgu law says that you can only be banished from a specific city, so make your way south and head towards Thelkin. You won't be able to join the Protectors or start a family, but you'll be safe and can live a decent life."

Eleni gave her father one last hug and said, "Thank You" before turning and heading towards the path down the mountain.

After a brief walk she turned a corner to see a member of the council, a few guards

and an Archon, her fathers second in command, waiting for her at the start of the path down the mountain.

“Just here to see you off.” Stated the council member.

As she approached he put his hand out, “Your birth stone please.”

His request confusing her, she looked behind to see if her father was still near but this high up the winds alone would prevent her from being heard.

“Why do you need my birth stone?” She asked.

“Well, Rylek here is going to mark you as an exile. How else do you think we do it? Anytime you try to enter the city alarms will sound and the Chief Archon himself will be dispatched to your position.” He said with a smug smirk.

The Archon, indifferent to the situation, placed his hand out and waited for her give over her birth stone. Reluctantly, Eleni reached into her pocket and produced her birth stone, handing it to Rylek.

He hovered his hand over it and said a few words before a green light etched a symbol on the surface of the stone. He handed it back to Eleni and headed back into the city

“That way you’re not tempted to sneak back in like your brother. If you see him, let him know we’d like to have a word with him as well.” The council member said as he and guards walked back towards the city.

Looking at her marked birth stone a wave of panic and uncertainty washed over her; her exile was real now, she could never return to Rithklern.

She headed down the long path that she had been on twice before in the last few days, but this time was different. There was no hope, no future, or promises; just despair.

As she descended she didn’t encounter any other graduates and could see the bottom of the mountain when there was a sharp pain in her neck. Reaching up she could feel something protruding and she pulled it out.

In her hands was a small dart with red feathers on the back. As she looked at it she began to see two and then four darts; her vision beginning to spin and a headache cropping up in the back of her mind.

She turned towards the direction the dart came a noticed a green cloaked figure walking her way.

Eleni took a few steps backwards before her legs gave out and she collapsed on the path. Her body stopped working but she was still conscious and her eyes sort of worked.



The green cloaked figure approached and crouched down, going through her pockets. She was certain it was a Sanguen sent to throw her birth stone down the mountain and watch her die.

After a few moments the figure pulled out the indigo shell and said, "That's not yours, I'll just be getting that to its rightful owner." The figure pocketed the shell and hoisted Eleni easily onto their shoulder.

As Eleni slowly lost consciousness on the shoulder of her assailant she noticed a second set of grey boots walk along side her captor and they began speaking in an odd language that sounded like someone drowning. After just a few words, the world went dark and Eleni was carried into the forest.

## Chapter 7

Slowly waking up to the sound of a crackling fire, Eleni had a splitting headache but felt like she had just had an excellent night's sleep. She slowly opened her eyes and saw a campfire with two figures sitting across from her whispering to one another.

Trying to keep from alerting them to her consciousness, Eleni took a quick survey of her predicament. She had regained all feeling in her limbs and could tell she wasn't bound. Her pack was sitting off to the side, but all her other possessions seemed to still be on her person.

She decided she could make a run for it and didn't really need her pack if she wasn't able to get it. As she glanced around the best she could to find an exit the grey cloaked figure spoke.

"You can run if you want, just watch out for the Sanguen camps nearby." The figure said in her tongue, but with an accent that made it sound like he was trying to drink a glass of water while talking.

He continued, "Azul here doesn't think you'd survive the night, but Greylig sent us to help you not babysit you." At the mention of her brother, Eleni paused briefly before sitting up and looking at the figure confused.

"Bet you didn't see that coming," he said with a smirk. "Yep, your brother figured you'd get exiled and sent us to intercept before you headed in the wrong direction and got killed."

Letting this sink in Eleni asked, "If you work for my brother, why didn't he just come himself?"

The figure took a swig of something and said, "Well first, let's get this straight. I work with your brother, not for your brother. I owed him a favor and he cashed it in on this." He took another swig, "Secondly, he's off on some other mission assigned to him right now, otherwise I suspect he would have come himself."

As he spoke, Eleni glanced between her two captors. The other man, Azu as he was called, wore a forest green cloak and beneath the pulled up cowl she could see green skin and very delicate features which made him Sanguen. The man speaking however was wearing what she first thought was a grey cloak, but as he got up to add some wood to the fire she could see was more of a worn out blue. His skin shimmered in the fire like he was sweating despite the cold night temperature. He was something she had never seen nor heard of.

He continued speaking, "So, like I said a moment ago you can run if you'd like but I'm sure Greylig would--"

Eleni abruptly interrupted, "What are you?" She asked.

Taken aback slightly, his minor look of confusion was quickly replaced with a smile and small laugh. Azu also chuckled a bit at this.

He said, "Well let's start with a name first. My name is Zyzra and I come from the city Atlit-Yam, which I'm guessing you've never heard of."

Eleni shook her head as she reached into her pack for some dried fruit, being knocked out twice in one day apparently did wonders for your appetite.

Zyzra continued, "It doesn't surprise me that you've never heard of my city or my kind. The Kalgu teach about the Sanguen out of necessity, you have to learn about them in order to kill them. But your people rarely interact with mine, and vice versa. In the minds of your leaders, if you don't interact with something there is no reason to teach about it. My people are called the Meerin and we are explorers and thinkers. So while you know nothing of us, we know a great deal about both your kinds." he said as he motioned towards Eleni and Azu.

Azu kind of rolled his eyes, obviously having dealt with Zyzra's arrogance before. Azu slid down in his bedroll and closed his eyes as Zyzra continued talking.

"And I'm sure you were unaware of the meetings that take place every year. A representative from your city, my city and his city," motioning to Azu, "get together once a year and discuss what needs to happen in order to avoid a war like the one that happened 200 years ago."

Eleni was intrigued and sucked in by Zyzra's oration. She asked, "Who from my city usually goes? The Grand Protector?"

Zyzra laughed. “The Grand Protector? You think that old coot would leave his mountain for anything short of an earthquake? No, it’s usually the Chief Archon; someone who is extremely intelligent and diplomatic, but not as valuable to Turtak as one of his Protectors.”

Eleni’s jaw almost hit the floor as she heard this, how had her father not told her about another race of beings he met with on a yearly basis. As she thought back in time, her father went on a trip to Thelkin every year at the same time and was gone for almost a week. That had to be the yearly meeting with the Sanguen and the Meerin.

“Now wait,” Eleni began. “If the talks are about piece why do Kalgu continue to kill Sanguen every year.” This question caught Azu’s attention and he opened one eye just enough to glance at Zyzra as he answered.

“I can see why Greylig wanted to recruit you,” Zyzra started “as that is a very good question. And the answer is simply, they don’t view those deaths as an act of war. It’s all orchestrated. The council sends their graduates out to die at the hands of the Sanguen, albeit a few return and join the ranks of Protector after killing a Sanguen. The Sanguen interrupt trade lines with Thelkin a few times a year, killing convoys and pillaging the goods. It’s a cycle, repeated every year and condoned, neigh encouraged, by the leaders of both groups. Why do you think you’ve never heard of us? We don’t condone this type of action, so we stay out of it.”

Eleni was starting to feel that rage build in the back of her mind again. Not only did they council purposefully teach them incorrect battle tactics, but they worked with the Sanguen while doing it! As more and more questions flooded her brain, her headache started to subside.

Through gritted teeth she asked, “Why would they do such a thing?”

Almost nonchalantly Zyzra answered, “Like I said, to prevent another war.”

“What do you mean? We are always at war with the Sanguen! That’s what I’ve been taught my entire life.” Eleni said excitedly.

“Ah but are you really?” Zyzra asked, “Prior to your test, when was the last time a Sanguen attacked the city? Or when was the last time a legion of Kalgu marched out of Rithklern and attacked a Sanguen outpost? Never? That doesn’t sound like war.”

His words confused her a bit, causing her rage to subside a bit and be replaced by curiosity. Having heard this part before Azu began to drift off to sleep again.

Zyzra continued, “Think about it, if you hadn’t been told you were at war with the Sanguen, would you have known from behind the walls of Rithklern?”

Thinking about it, Eleni answered, “No, I guess not.”

“And Azu, if you hadn’t been told to hunt down and kill Kalgu, would you have known you were at war with them from the relative safety of your primitive tree houses?” Zyzra asked in a slightly condescending tone.

Without moving or opening an eye Azu raised a hand and made what Eleni assumed to be an offensive gesture in Sanguen society as Zyzra feigned insult at his reaction.

“Does he ever talk?” She asked.

“Not to me,” Zyzra said before continuing “the point is the average citizen of your respective cities doesn’t even know what war is. The war that took place 200 years ago was brutal. Spy’s were infiltrating cities, assassinating from within. Archon’s were setting fires to entire Sanguen villages. The Sanguen were purposefully taking the Gidri’s of their warriors and hiding them in Kalgu cities to force the transformation you saw yesterday. Do they not teach anything about the war in your schools?”

Eleni shook her head, “Nothing like what you’re saying. They teach us that Sanguen are evil and they started a war a long time ago. They teach us incorrect ways to fight them and then expect us to kill one.

Again without moving or opening an eye, Azu said, “We didn’t start the war, your council did.”

Slightly startled that he spoke, but more confused by what he said, Eleni looked at Zyzra and asked, “What does he mean?”

“Well, he’s right.” Zyzra started, “Technically the Kalgu did start the war, but on accident. You see, your Test of Stone and melding ceremony weren’t always a thing. They are rather recent in the history of your people’s. About 200 years ago a Chief Archon discovered that the magic inside the Gidri could be used to bond it to a Protector’s birth stone, enhancing them both as a weapon. At first it was simple things like clubs and, well clubs. But over time the Archons discovered how to manipulate the magic and create rather glorious weapons. Once this happened, it was no longer a matter of collecting Gidri’s haphazardly. So, your council created the Test of Stone where they could send out their new warriors every year and those that killed a Sanguen would have a masterful weapon forged for them. As I’m sure you can imagine, this targeted killing didn’t sit well with the Sanguen so they actually diplomatically asked the Kalgu to stop. But your people got greedy and refused. They continued to slaughter Sanguen, forcing them fight back and that eventually developed into the war that happened those 200 years ago. Incidentally, it’s also when the Sanguen began fighting in groups of three.”

Trying to take this all in, Eleni's headache was back although not as strong as before.

She said, "Wow. That's a lot to take in. I mean I know the council are liars, but that just seems like a big deal to not talk about. And if the Meerin are so hands off, how do you know all of this?"

Zyzra answered, "Well, specifically it's my job. I am a Chronicler of Atlit-Yam. Knowledge and specifically world history is what I have been tasked with by our leader. The Meering make it their priority to explore and learn as much about the world as possible. After the Crux happened we wanted to try to keep history from repeating itself, but if it was destined to do so we wanted to at least be as prepared as possible."

Eleni asked, "So I'm guessing my knowledge of the Crux is also a little lacking, what do you know about that?"

Giving out a little chuckle Zyzra said, "That is a question for another time. Chroniclers have spent their entire life studying the Crux, and I could spend an entire month telling you about it. Better I give you a book when we get to the city and let you learn about the Crux on your own. After reading it I will gladly answer any questions you may have."

Satisfied with this arrangement, Eleni asked, "So we are going to Atlit-Yam?"

Zyzra said, "Indeed, we will head out first thing tomorrow and should make it there before dark. We'll make much better time now that we don't have to carry you." Smiling at that last comment he ended the conversation there by sliding down into his bedroll. With a wave of his hand the fire went out and only a curl of smoke and embers could be seen.

His use of magic caught Eleni off guard, but didn't surprise her given how much new information she had learned today. Tomorrow was going to be a long and interesting day and Greylig definitely had some explaining to do once they were reunited.

In the faint glow of the embers she pulled out her bedroll and crawled inside. She listened to the sound of nature and let the drone of the wind lull her to sleep.

## Chapter 8

The smell and sounds of something cooking over a fire gently woke up Eleni the next morning as Azu had a pan of mystery meat cooking. With his hood down and the morning light breaking into camp she could see a little more of the Sanguen.

Azu's skin tone was that of a dark olive with forest green, short cut hair. He looked to be rather lean and not overly tall, but Eleni knew he was strong for how far he had carried her yesterday.

"Ah, you're up," he said after noticing her slowly start to get up, "Zyzra's ran ahead to check the route and make sure no Kalgu or Sanguen might impede our path."

"Aren't you worried the fire will attract attention?" She asked while stretching.

"Nah, as a Chronicler, Zyzra has a solid grasp of magic and our campsite is all but invisible to anyone passing by. Unless they walk into the middle of the camp we've got nothing to worry about." Azu informed her.

Magic hadn't even occurred to Eleni. The life of a Protector is almost completely void of magic. Even with her father as Chief Archon she was never really keyed into what magic was capable of.

"Well what's for breakfast?" Eleni asked as she walked over closer to the fire.

"There's no name for it in the Kalgu tongue. But Greylig always says it taste's like those little birds your people have running around." Azu said.

"Pullum you mean?" Asked Eleni.

"Ya! He always said it tastes like pullum. I've never had pullum so I wouldn't know." He said as he pulled the meat off the fire and put it on a plate. He handed the plate to Eleni, keeping none for himself.

"You're not eating?" She asked.

Azu shook his head and walked over to a tree on the edge of the encampment and said "Sangeun don't eat meat. The forest provides everything we need." As he said this he placed a hand on the tree and a small amount of light radiated out from his hand print. Eleni watched in awe as mushrooms, flowers, and a strange fruit she hadn't seen before sprouted from the tree.

After a few moments Azu pulled his hand away and began gathering the food, putting them on a large platter. He sat down by the fire again and pulled out a little box with various spices and sauces in it.

"Please do eat, you won't offend me." Azu said reassuringly as he noticed Eleni hadn't touched her breakfast yet.

Still watching what he was doing she began to cut a piece of the mystery meat off and much to her surprise it did taste almost exactly like pullum but the texture was off just a bit.

“Greylig was right, this does taste a lot like pullum! Who would have guessed that something from the ocean would taste like a bird from the mountains.” Eleni said. “How’s your...breakfast?” she added.

Azu let out a slight chuckle to himself and said, “Wonderful actually. Every day I tell the forest to surprise me, and every day the forest brings me something new to eat. I’ve actually never had this fruit before, but it’s quite tasty.” He pulled out a small knife and cut a piece for Eleni to try.

“Wow! That is outstanding! We never have anything like that in Rithklern. We grow so few plants in the mountains I didn’t even know it was possible for them to turn produce something so tasty.” She said.

“You’d be surprised what nature is capable of if you respect it.” Azu said as he finished his meal. He had mixed the mushrooms with a few sauces and spices from his kit and stuffed it all tightly inside the flower, making a hand held pouch like meal. It was something Eleni had never seen before, but something she bookmarked in the back of her mind for the future.

As they were finishing their meals Zyzra appeared from around a tree and entered the campsite.

“Good, you’re awake. We can get moving quickly. There are a few Sanguen parties nearby but if we’re careful we shouldn’t cross path’s with them. And if we do they are generally more amicable than Kalgu graduates who attack first.” Zyzra said as he gathered his pack.

He added, “Well what are you waiting for? Azu put that fire out and lets get going, we have to make Atlit-Yam by mid day.”

Azu reverted back to his less than chatty self around Zyzra and quickly dashed the fire while packing his gear back up.

Eleni hastily finished her fillet of sea creature, handing the plate back to Azu, and rolled her bedroll up. Within just a few minutes they were all packed up and ready to go.

After a few hours of walking in relative silence for fear of drawing too much attention the forest started thinning out and a cool breeze that smelled a bit of salt filled the air.

“We’re getting very close,” Said Zyzra.

And within minutes the trees had ended completely and they were standing at the bank of a body of water the size of which Eleni would have never guessed existed.

When she looked behind her all she saw was forest, but straight out in front was blue for as far as the eye could see.

“So do we have to cross it?” She asked.

She had seen small boats, but nothing large enough to stand a chance for very long amidst this.

“Not exactly.” Zyzra said with a smile. Reaching forward with both hands he placed one on the shoulder of each party member and chanted a few words.

A slight shimmer started at the tip of Eleni’s head and slowly made it’s way to the ground as Zyzra continued his chant. Once it had reached the bottom of her she noticed her skin had the same sheen to it that Zyzra’s did.

“We won’t be able to talk while underwater, so follow me and try not to aggravate any of the wildlife.” Zyzra said.

“Wait? While underwater? Thought we were going to you city....Atlit-yam or something” Eleni asked still not sure what was going on.

Glancing at Azu, Zyzra said, “Not a very quick one is she.”

Azu looked back at Zyzra with a look of disdain and said to Eleni, “Just follow us and you’ll see. Oh, and just breath normally.” He then hopped off the bank and started walking into the water, Zyzra right behind him.

After a brief look around Eleni hesitantly hopped off the bank and entered the water. Much to her surprise however neither she nor her gear felt wet. It was almost like she was gliding through the water like one walks through air.

Both Zyzra and Azu had completely disappeared beneath the water at this point and trusting Zyzra’s magic she tentatively placed her head underwater.

Reflexively she held her breath as long as she could and when it was no longer possible she took a deep gasp, certain she’d drown herself, but it was as if she were breathing air. No water entered her lungs and she found her breathing the same as on land.

Also odd was that she wasn’t floating like normal when submerged in water. She was walking along the bottom of the ocean bed as if it too were above the water, the whole experience was rather odd and quite surreal. After getting a little more comfortable with this mode of transportation, she jogged a bit and caught up to the other two.

As they descended deeper and deeper into the ocean Zyzra pulled out a small orb that gave off a faint light, allowing them to see a few meters in front of them.



At one point Azu tapped Eleni and pointed above them. She looked up and saw something the size of their training school with four fins and six tentacles glide by a ways overhead. Azu then made hand motions similar to that of eating and Eleni was now a little more afraid of her breakfast than she had been a few hours ago.

While she had prepared for her exile to be uncomfortable, she never would have guessed it would involve walking under water for what seemed like days. The darkness of the ocean swallowing all light except that from Zyzra's globe, she wasn't entirely sure how long they had been walking, but was sure it was at least a few hours in absolute silence. She worried they were going to have to walk across the entire ocean.

Zyzra put his globe away and after her eyes adjusted to the new level of darkness, Eleni could see a faint glow coming from up ahead. Every step closer and the glowing intensified and Eleni could see the outline of a ridge up ahead, the glowing coming from beyond.

After just a few more moments the ridge became more defined the glow from behind was enough for her to see many creatures swimming through the water up ahead. As they reached the ridge and were able to see over, Eleni was treated to a site very few see, and something she couldn't have created in her wildest dreams.

On the ocean floor a few kilometers away stood the grandest sight she had ever witnessed. Built into a natural canyon in the ocean floor, the city of Atlit-Yam was composed of thousands of pods and walkways all interconnected, and each illuminated by what she could only guess was magic.

It looked as though the entire city was made of glass and at all times could look out into the ocean and admire it's beauty. In the center of the city, hovering between two canyon walls, was a pod larger than the rest and looked like the Archon Tower of Rithklern, only made of glass. Standing a top it was a stone statue of a woman holding a large compass in one hand and a walking stick in the other.

Circling around the city she noticed many large aquatic creatures with structures on their back. Some leave one end of the city and dock on the other side, while the larger creatures would take off into the darkness and slowly disappear from sight.

Eleni stood in awe as she took this all in before Azu grabbed her shoulder, smiling and signaled to a long stairway carved into the cliff face before them. Walking down the steep stairway was not easy, but it gave her more time to study the wonder in front of her.

They reached the bottom and started down a long road towards the underwater city of Atlit-yam.

