



PROLOGUE

A long time ago, in the spring before the five days of the unspeakable, Finnikin of the Rock dreamed that he was to sacrifice a pound of flesh to save the royal house of Lumatere.

The dream came to him from the gods on the eve of the Harvest Moon Festival, when the whole of the kingdom slept under the stars in the Field of Celebration. It was Finnikin's favorite night of the year, watching his fellow Lumaterans dance and give thanks for a life of peace and plenty. When the dawn broke and the priest-king sang the Song of Lumatere, the joy in people's souls lit up their world. And what a world it was—made up of those hailing from the Flatlands, the Forest, the Rock, the Mountains, and the River. All protected by a beloved king and queen and their five children, said to be descended from the gods themselves.

Finnikin told his friends Prince Balthazar and Lucian of the Monts about the dream the next morning as they spat olive pits into the river. The three boys loved their mornings on the waterfront, watching Finnikin's father, the captain of the King's Guard, as he and his men

checked the merchandise on the barges. No one was more formidable than Captain Trevanion when he was protecting the kingdom, and many spoke of his love for the gentle Lady Beatriss of the Flatlands, who would give birth to their child that year, and how she adored Finnikin as if he were her own.

Upon hearing Finnikin's dream that day, Balthazar convinced them that no harm would ever come to Lumatere as long as his father was king. Lucian claimed that if the gods were serious, they would have asked him to protect his royal cousins, for no other reason than that he had turned nine that spring and was a head taller than the others. And so, for a time, the dream was forgotten.

Each afternoon, Finnikin, Balthazar, and Lucian played in the Forest of Lumatere, practicing how they would one day catch the silver wolf. Legend had it that only a true warrior could conquer such a beast, and they were certain that Balthazar, the heir to the throne of Lumatere, would be the one. The three friends spent all summer digging the trap, and when it was finished, they dragged Balthazar's youngest sister, Princess Isaboe, along to be the bait. But the wolf never appeared.

As summer moved into autumn and the days grew shorter, Finnikin began to worry. He would tremble in fear when he remembered his dream. At night he prayed to Lagrami, the goddess of light, to protect his unborn sibling, to keep Balthazar and his four sisters safe, and to watch over the Forest Dwellers, even though they worshipped another goddess and lived outside the kingdom walls. Until one day, finally, he convinced his companions to make a pledge.

And so they climbed the rock of three wonders at the crest of Finnikin's village, and they cut flesh from their bodies and tugged a strand of hair from the weeping Isaboe's head to make a sacrifice to their goddess. Balthazar pledged to die defending his royal house of Lumatere. Finnikin swore to be their protector and guide for as long as he lived. Lucian vowed he would be the light whom they traveled toward in times of need.

That evening, Finnikin and Balthazar sat perched high on the flat

roof of a cottage in the village. As always, they spoke of the silver wolf and the might of a warrior king, and they imagined the years to come when one would rule and one would guard. Finnikin looked down at Princess Isaboe, who slept between them, and although his thigh ached from the pledge wound, he felt peace in his heart that he had done the right thing. They were indeed blessed as no other kingdom in the land.

Until the five days of the unspeakable.

When the king and queen and their three oldest daughters were slaughtered in the palace and Princess Isaboe was slain in the Forest of Lumatere.

When Balthazar's bloody handprints were found splattered on the kingdom walls and the people of Lumatere, seeking someone to blame, turned on one another.

When the despised cousin of the dead king entered the kingdom with six hundred of his men and began to burn the Forest Dwellers in their homes.

When Captain Trevanion was arrested for treason and sent to a foreign prison and his beloved Lady Beatriss died delivering a stillborn baby in the palace dungeon.

When Seranonna, the matriarch of the Forest Dwellers, cried a blood curse as she burned at the stake, a curse that caused the land to shudder and split the earth, that swallowed those who failed to run from the fury of its jaws, that crumbled village homes and shook the palace to its foundations.

Those who could escaped to the Valley of Tranquillity, outside the kingdom walls, trampling their neighbors who were left behind. And then the dark forces of the curse entombed the kingdom, dividing the people in two.

This is the story, as told to those not born to see such days, recorded in the Book of Lumatere so they will never forget.

The story of those trapped inside the kingdom, never to be heard from again, and those who escaped but were forced to walk the land in a diaspora of misery.

Until ten years later, when Finnikin of Lumatere climbed another rock. . . .

part ONE

The Novice

CHAPTER 1

When it finally appeared in the distance, Finnikin wondered if it was some phantom half-imagined in this soulless kingdom at the end of the world.

There had always been talk that this land had been forsaken by the gods. Yet perched at the top of a rocky outcrop, cloaked in blue-gray mist, was proof to the contrary: the cloister of the goddess Lagrami.

From where they stood, the flat expanse that led to its fortified entrance resembled the softness of sand over a desert. Finnikin could see a trail of pilgrims with their heads bent low, sacks across their shoulders and staffs in their hands. They made a line across the low-lying country like tiny insignificant ants at the mercy of the nothingness surrounding them.

"We must hurry," the king's First Man urged, speaking the Sarnak language. Sir Topher had decided that once they reached this wasteland of Sendecane, they would use the language of the neighboring kingdom to the north. At the inn two nights before, he had made it known that they were pilgrims themselves: holy men who had come to the end of the earth to pay homage at the

greatest temple of the blessed goddess Lagrami. To be anything else in this part of the land would raise suspicion and fear, and Finnikin had come to realize that those full of fear were the most dangerous of people.

As they drew closer to the rock, the terrain beneath their feet began to change. What Finnikin had thought was sand turned out to be a thick claylike substance that tested his balance. They were walking on a seabed, and by nightfall the waters would return and there would be no hope of leaving this place until the next low tide.

At the entrance of the rock of Lagrami, they followed the wide stone steps that circled up to the summit, passing the pilgrims kneeling at the shrine of welcome. The leather of Finnikin's boots gave little protection from the cold hard surface, and he found himself looking back to where the pilgrims knelt, knowing that some would make their way up on their knees as a display of devotion to their goddess. He had witnessed the ignorance that came from blind faith time and time again over the years, and he wondered how many of these pilgrims were Lumateran exiles searching for some kind of salvation.

Higher, the steps became stones to climb. Finnikin suspected that sooner or later they would be forced to crawl their way to the top, where the messenger of the High Priestess was surely waiting. Yet not even halfway up, the stones gave way to a smooth cliff face, leaving them nothing to grip except tiny metal bars embedded in the rock. Finnikin stared, confused. He looked down at his oversize feet and wondered how it would be possible to balance them on so narrow a ledge.

"Not for our feet, my boy," Sir Topher said with a sigh. He wiggled his fingers in front of Finnikin's face.

Mercy.

"Do not look down," he warned.

Sir Topher began to climb, and Finnikin felt a shower of grains from the rocks above as they crumbled under his mentor's weight. One caught him in the eye, and he resisted the urge to wipe it free, preferring to be blinded rather than lose his grip.

"I said, do not look down," Sir Topher grunted, as if reading his thoughts.

"If I look up, I'll lose my dinner," Finnikin gasped.

"And what a pity that would be. All those lovely goose gizzards. All that rabbit pie you insisted on wolfing down despite my warning. All gone to waste."

Finnikin paused, his head spinning and his mouth beginning to taste of a sickly substance. The dull stench of pigeon filled his nostrils and turned the contents of his belly. His hands ached from gripping the metal bars, and he longed to be able to place his feet flat against the rock. Yet this journey up the cliff face had to be worth it. Somehow the High Priestess had located him and Sir Topher in the kingdom of Belegonia. Not an easy feat when most of the time they chose not to be found.

For the past ten years, Sir Topher and Finnikin had worked to improve the conditions of Lumaterans living in overcrowded camps rife with fever, fear, and despair. Former dukes of Lumatere, now employed in foreign courts, had often requested their presence, eager to fund their efforts to bring a reprieve to their people. Less welcome were the approaches from foreign kings and queens, who always seemed to have a price for their goodwill. Often it was information about what was taking place in a neighboring kingdom in exchange for palace protection for the exiles camped along their riverbanks and valleys. While protocol ensured that the king's First Man and his apprentice were granted access to any court in the land, Sir Topher had learned to be cautious when it came to accepting invitations.

But this one had been different. It began with a name

whispered to Finnikin deep in the night as he lay sleeping among the exiles in Belegonia.

Balthazar.

Finnikin had dragged Sir Topher from his sleep in an instant. He could hardly describe the messenger to his mentor. He could only remember the voice in his ear and the disappearing robes of one who spoke of the isolated cloister of Sendecane. The moment Finnikin had finished speaking, Sir Topher rose from his bedroll and packed it without a word.

Finnikin reached the summit of the cliff first and stayed draped over the stone, trying to regain his breath before leaning across to help Sir Topher, who was wheezing and hungering for air. Hearing a sound behind them, they turned to where a wizened old novice stood before an opening in the wall. When she shuffled around and disappeared into the confines of the cloister, they understood that they were to follow.

Finnikin's lanky frame meant he was forced to crouch through the damp tunnel, which led to a set of narrow spiral stairs. When they reached the top, they followed the old woman along a hallway, past rooms where other novices knelt in prayer. They crossed the cloister and entered a large chamber with high windows that let in the light. This room interested Finnikin greatly. There were rows and rows of tables where novices sat, absorbed in their work. Some were poring over bound manuscripts, copying their contents, while others read. Finnikin had seen a room like this before, at the palace of Osteria. The manuscripts there held records of each kingdom of the land: their gods and goddesses, their wars, their origins, their landscape, their language, their art, their food, their lives.

As a child in exile, Finnikin had worried that his kingdom would have no further record of existence, so he began his own

work on the *Book of Lumatere*. He wondered if these scholars felt the same way he did about the scent of parchment and the feel of a quill in their hands. But their faces revealed little, and the old novice's pace began to quicken, leading them into a dimly lit room full of columns. And there, in the middle of the room, stood the High Priestess.

"Blessed Kiria." Sir Topher bowed and kissed her hand.

"You have come a long way, Sir Topher."

Finnikin heard the note of surprise in her voice, almost wonder. Like all priestesses of Lagrami, her hair was worn long, almost to her knees, marking her years of devotion to her goddess. Upon her death, the braid would be cut and offered as a sacrifice, while somewhere else in the land a novice would enter the cloister, her hair shorn and her journey begun.

"The Lumateran pilgrims who have made their way to us over the years have taken courage in the existence of the king's First Man and his young apprentice," she said, looking at them both.

"It is good of you to acknowledge our cursed people, blessed Kiria," Sir Topher said.

She smiled warmly. "We are neighbors, despite the distance. I feel anguish for your beloved priest-king, to have lost his people in such a way, and I am here as a servant to your people as much as to mine. It is the wish of our goddess."

"Do you have the good fortune to know of our priest-king's whereabouts?" Sir Topher asked.

The High Priestess shook her head sadly. Then her expression changed and she walked farther into the room, beckoning them to follow. "You have come for the girl?" she asked.

Girl. Finnikin's heart dropped. He had hoped; *stupidly* he had hoped. The fury he felt for harboring such a dream made him sway on his feet.

"We have little time before the tide rises, so I will speak quickly," she said in a low voice. "Two springs past, a girl came to us. Her name, Evanjalin. Unlike many of our Lumateran novices, she was not orphaned during the five days of the unspeakable but belonged to the exiles in Sarnak."

Finnikin flinched and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw that Sir Topher had paled. The High Priestess nodded. "I see that you are well aware of the ill-fated exiles in Sarnak."

"We have petitioned the king of Sarnak to have those responsible for the massacre brought to justice," Sir Topher said.

Finnikin wondered why they had wasted their time. The slaughter of a group of Lumateran exiles, two years past, was of little concern to an apathetic king.

The High Priestess leaned forward to whisper. "The novice Evanjalin has a gift, and I promise you this: in my time I have come across many who claim to have extraordinary gifts, but I know this girl speaks the truth. She professes to have walked through the sleep, not only of your beloved heir, but of your people trapped inside Lumatere."

It was one of the most fanciful stories they had heard to date, and Finnikin bit his tongue to hold back a contemptuous retort.

"It is not that we are surprised by the notion of Prince Balthazar being alive," Sir Topher said carefully, clearing his voice as a warning to Finnikin. "It has always been our hope that there was truth in the tales that the heir survived. But these past ten years, there have been many claims to the Lumateran throne across the land. Each one has proved to be false. You are aware that as a consequence, the ruler of each kingdom of Skuldenore has decreed it treason to make such claims."

"Yet I hear that no Lumateran acknowledges the reign of the

king trapped behind those walls," the High Priestess said. "Is he not referred to as the impostor king?"

"Despite our belief that the one ruling inside Lumatere played a role in the deaths of our beloveds, as far as the leaders of Skuldenore are concerned, he was legitimately crowned the king."

A hasty decision made by those controlled by fear, who dared to meddle in the affairs of another kingdom, Finnikin thought bitterly.

"If you are to believe anything, believe this," she said firmly. "The rightful heir to the throne of Lumatere and survivor of that wretched night has spoken to the novice Evanjalin."

"Does the novice have a message from him?" Sir Topher asked.

"Just a name," the High Priestess said, "of a childhood companion of your prince. A trusted friend."

Suddenly every pulse in Finnikin's body pounded. He felt the eyes of both the High Priestess and Sir Topher on him. Then the High Priestess came closer, taking his face between her callused hands.

"Is that what you were to him, Finnikin of the Rock?" she said softly. "For I do believe your king is calling. It has been ten years too long and Balthazar has chosen you, through this girl, to take your people home."

"Who is she to be worthy of the association with our heir?" Finnikin asked stiffly, moving away. "Does she claim to have made his acquaintance?"

"She is a simpleton. She has taken the vow of silence, broken only to tell me of the sleep and that you, Finnikin, would one day come to collect her. I believe she is somehow promised to your heir."

"What makes you believe such a thing, blessed Kiria?" Sir Topher asked.

“At night she whispers his name in her sleep with intimacy and reverence. As if their bond is ordained by the gods.”

This time Finnikin failed to hold back the sound of his disbelief.

The High Priestess smiled sadly. “You have lost faith in the gods.”

He held her gaze and knew she could read the confirmation in his eyes.

“Do you believe in magic?” she persisted.

“My kingdom has been impenetrable for the past ten years with no logical explanation, so I have no choice but to say I do believe,” he admitted ruefully.

“It was indeed a very dark magic used by the matriarch of the Forest Dwellers. Made up mostly of hatred and grief for what Lumaterans had allowed to happen to her people in the days following the deaths of the king and his family. But somehow some kind of good survived, and the novice Evanjalín is the key. You would know by now the meaning of the archaic words spoken by Seranonna that day.”

Finnikin had not heard the name Seranonna since his childhood. He did not want her to be known as anything other than the witch who had cursed Lumatere.

“We were in the square that day,” Sir Topher said, “and have spent these past ten summers deciphering the curse, but there are words we are still unsure of. Seranonna used more than one of the ancient languages.”

“And those words you do understand?” the High Priestess asked. She stared at Finnikin, waiting for him to speak.

“‘Dark will lead the light, and our *resurdus* will rise.’ It’s the ancient word for king, is it not? *Resurdus*?”

The High Priestess nodded. “The curse was to condemn

Lumaterans for allowing the slaughter of her people, but it was also to protect the one she claimed to have seen fleeing from the forest that night. The *resurdus*. The heir. The dark and light will lead you to him.”

“But where are we supposed to take this . . . child? Evanjalín?” Finnikin asked.

The High Priestess gave a small humorless laugh. “Do you consider yourself a child, Finnikin?”

“Of course not.”

“The novice Evanjalín is nearly your age and left her childhood behind far too early.”

“Where are we to take her, blessed Kiria?” Sir Topher prompted gently.

The High Priestess hesitated. “She claims that the answers lie in the kingdom of Sorel.”

Mercy. Finnikin would have preferred to have heard Sarnak or Yutlind. Even Charyn with its barbaric ways. He would have preferred to take her to hell. It would certainly be less dangerous than Sorel.

“And you believe Balthazar will contact us there?” Sir Topher said.

“I do not know what to believe. The goddess has not bestowed the gift of foresight on me. All I can pass on is this girl and the name of the one she claimed would come for her.” Once again her eyes were on Finnikin. “Perhaps both chosen by a missing king to be his guide.”

There was a sound by the door, and the High Priestess held out her hand as a figure appeared from the shadows.

The girl had the coloring of the Lumateran Mont people, a golden skin tone, much darker than Finnikin’s own fair skin. Her hair was shaved, but he imagined that if it were allowed to grow,

it would match the darkness of her eyes. Dressed in a gray shift made of coarse fabric, she would easily be passed by without a second glance.

“Sir Topher, Finnikin, I present to you the novice Evanjalin.”

She cast her eyes down, and Finnikin watched as her hands shook and then clenched.

“What is it you fear?” he asked in Lumateran.

“Most of her time was spent in Sarnak,” the High Priestess explained. “It is the language we have used during the break of silence.”

Finnikin could no longer hold back his frustration. He pulled Sir Topher aside. “We know nothing of her,” he said in Belegonian to ensure the novice and the High Priestess would not understand. “This is all too strange.”

“Enough, Finnikin,” Sir Topher said firmly. He turned back to the High Priestess. “Has she spoken since?”

She shook her head. “She has taken the vow of silence. She has suffered much, Sir Topher, and her faith is strong. It’s the least we can leave her with.”

Sir Topher nodded. “If we are to make the tide, we must leave soon.”

Finnikin was stunned at how swiftly Sir Topher had made his decision, but the look in the older man’s eyes warned him not to protest. Biting his tongue, Finnikin watched as the High Priestess took the girl’s head in her hands and pressed her lips tenderly to her forehead. He saw the girl’s eyes close and her mouth tremble, but then her face became impassive again and she walked away from the High Priestess without a backward glance.

The descent was as nauseating as the climb up, made worse for Finnikin by the burden he carried in his heart. Taking this girl halfway across the land had not been part of the plan he and Sir

Topher had worked out in the early days of winter. The uncertainty of their new path did not sit well with him.

When they reached the base of the cliff, they passed the group of kneeling pilgrims. A hand snaked out to grab the cloth of the novice's cloak.

"Your feet," Finnikin said, noticing for the first time that she was barefoot. "We can't afford to be slowed down because you don't have shoes."

But the girl did not respond and continued walking. It was only when they were a good distance from the cloister that she looked back and he saw the raw emotion of loss on her face. By then the waters reached their knees and Finnikin feared they would not make it to safety without being washed away. Here, the tide was said to return at amazing speed and pilgrims had drowned without any warning. He grabbed her arm and pulled her forward, and suddenly her look of vulnerability disappeared and in its place was a flash of triumph.

As if somehow the novice Evanjalín had gotten her way.

CHAPTER 2

In the days that followed, cold winds gnawed at their bones and a winter that refused to end kept the days short and darkness a constant companion. Sir Topher decided that the best route to Sorel would be to cross into Sarnak and follow the road through Charyn. Although the quickest route was down through Belegonia, Sir Topher argued that they would not return to Sarnak for at least another year and there was a chance they would encounter survivors from the massacre. On this point Finnikin agreed; it was their destination he could not accept.

"We're making a mistake," he said on the third morning, forced now to dress behind a tree. He pulled on his buckskin trousers and then his boots, tucking a tiny dagger next to his calf.

"As you have now mentioned for the tenth time, Finnikin," Sir Topher called out with maddening patience.

Finnikin had come to appreciate Sir Topher's patience over the years, ever since he had been placed in his care by Perri the Savage, his father's second-in-charge. Today, however, there was more irritation than appreciation.

“Sorel,” he muttered as he stepped out from behind the tree. “No one goes to Sorel. No exile would set up camp in Sorel. Not even the people of Sorel want to live in Sorel.”

“Let’s accept our path, Finnikin, and hold our tongue, as the novice does so beautifully,” Sir Topher replied.

The girl did little to lessen Finnikin’s frustration. At night he watched her toss in her bedroll as though possessed by demons, crying, gritting her teeth, calling out with such despair. As they trekked across the flat treeless earth, sometimes her body would slump as if what she dreamed was weighing down her spirit. Other times there was a spring in her step and a soft dreamy smile on her lips, as if she was remembering a moment so happy that it effortlessly carried her over the cold barren land.

Deep down, Finnikin knew there was something more to his unease than this strange girl traveling with them. The mention of the heir had awoken memories, and with them came a restlessness, a sense of futility about the future. In the past ten years, the pages of the dead in the *Book of Lumatere* had grown. There were those who had been slain in Sarnak, those who had died in a plague village in Charyn, those who had drowned when the floods in Belegonia swept over the river camps. Without their own healers, there were no cures for the ailments that others in the land seemed to easily survive.

When they crossed the border into Sarnak, there was little relief from the weather, but a hot meal was more readily available and Finnikin was glad to be able to leave behind the stale bread and moldy cheese that had been their staple diet for over a week. Trees and shrubs began to appear beside the road, and as they continued east, they found themselves in thick woodland, where they decided to camp.

That night, as Sir Topher pored over the map, Finnikin caught the girl staring at the sword that lay by his saddlebag.

"It's my father's," he said gruffly. He pulled it out of its scabbard. The grip was plain, except for a stone—a ruby, rich and bright—embedded in the handle. As a child, Finnikin had imagined it had powers. He believed anything Trevanion touched did. The novice reached out and placed a finger on the stone.

"The ruby is the official stone of Lumatere. Did you know that?" Sir Topher asked, looking up from his map.

In response, the novice dug her hand deep into her pocket and withdrew a ruby ring. She gently traced its contours, then extended her hand as if offering it to Finnikin to take. When he made no attempt to touch it, Sir Topher reached over and examined it instead. Finnikin could see from the warmth in her eyes that the ring held memories much the same as his father's sword did. At the thought of his father, he was suddenly swamped by a wave of grief. Standing abruptly, he grabbed the crossbow and disappeared into the woods.

Later, Finnikin emerged from the forest with two fair-sized hares. With little fuss, the novice took one of the hares and sat by the fire, cutting into the skin and stripping it from the body of the dead animal with ease. As Finnikin watched, she wiped her brow, leaving a streak of blood across her face. Feeling his gaze on her, she looked up, and in the flickering light of the fire, he saw a fierceness in her eyes that no humble dress or pious look could disguise.

Sir Topher was melancholy that night, and the mead they had secured in the border town had loosened his tongue. Finnikin knew that in this state, Sir Topher would drink and talk. Always about the five days of the unspeakable. Finnikin loved this man dearly and knew he would be dead if not for his mentor's kindness, but when Sir Topher spoke of those days, Finnikin wanted

to shout at him to stick to facts and plans. Facts and plans had results. The days of the unspeakable were impossible to explain or to solve. Finnikin had learned over the years not to think of anything beyond the practicalities of getting from one point to another. To focus on the achievable. Locating a piece of land for the exiles of Lumatere was achievable. But only if they could find a benevolent host, and he knew in his heart that the kingdom of Belegonia was the place. Most of the time Sir Topher agreed, except when he was drinking mead and succumbing to memory.

The girl showed interest in Sir Topher's story. She put aside the half-skinned hare and kept his words flowing by refilling his cup each time it emptied. Sir Topher relished the opportunity to tell the tale again.

"Does she need to know?" Finnikin asked at one point, not looking up.

"The silence that meets us in every exile camp is a paralysis that has been passed on to the next generation," Sir Topher said reprovingly.

And so Finnikin heard it again. How the enemy had come in the dead of the night. How they were never able to explain how the assassins had managed to get past the guards, for it was only five days later that the kingdom gates became impenetrable, and questions stayed unanswered. Some said the assassins were in Lumatere long before that night, hiding and plotting to sweep through the palace and take the lives of every single inhabitant: the cooks, the guards, the ladies-in-waiting, the pages, the nursemaids, the groundsmen. Sir Topher had been sent to Belegonia with the ambassador on palace business and had lived with the guilt of surviving ever since.

It was Trevanion, captain of the King's Guard and Finnikin's father, who made the gruesome discovery. At the second change of guard, he returned and found the first man dead at the palace

entrance. A path of bodies led to the grand hall where the king, queen, and three older princesses were found slain. A desperate search for Balthazar and Isaboe followed. Balthazar alive meant the survival of Lumatere. It meant that no stranger would dare enter the kingdom and claim it as theirs. The King's Guard searched every house in the palace village, every square inch of the Flatlands, crossed the mountains, searched the Rock Village, and scoured the caves. Finally, they left the confines of the kingdom walls and there they saw it, in the cold light of the rising sun. A small bloody handprint on the outside wall of their fortress. As if Balthazar had been hammering all night long to reenter a world that had already ceased to be.

Sir Topher stopped speaking, and Finnikin looked up. As always, there were tears on the face of the king's First Man as he relived the horror of what they found in the Forest of Lumatere that day. Limbs and flesh, clumps of hair, and finally the blood-soaked clothing of the youngest princess, Isaboe.

The novice Evanjalín barely seemed to breathe. Her hands were clasped under her chin as if in prayer, but unlike Finnikin, who could not bear to hear more, her eyes begged Sir Topher to continue.

"In the Forest of Lumatere lived the worshippers of Sagrami, the goddess of night," Sir Topher said, composing himself. "In centuries past they were persecuted and forced to live outside the kingdom walls. Many were healers, mystics, and empaths, with gifts that could not be explained, but over the years, they had begun to work and live among their fellow Lumaterans again.

"The matriarch of the Forest Dwellers was a powerful woman named Seranonna. She was once the wet nurse to the queen, and there was a bond between them that the king honored for the love of his wife.

“But on the morning after the slaughter, Seranonna was found with her hands and clothes soaked with blood. Grief-stricken Lumaterans said it belonged to the youngest princess, that somehow the Forest Dwellers were involved in a sacrifice using the blood of the royal children. The Forest Dwellers claimed that at least two of their people had seen Balthazar running through the forest that night, and that in her search for him, Seranonna had found the remains of Isaboe and tried to gather up the pieces. It was for this reason, they swore, that Seranonna had the blood of the child stained in the lifelines on the palms of her hands.

“But the villagers would not listen. Their king was dead. A king directly descended from the gods. His beloved queen of the Mont people dead. His beautiful daughters raped, slaughtered. His youngest daughter torn to shreds. His son, the heir, missing. His palace guards and people slain. And so the Lumateran people rounded up all those who worshipped Sagrami within the kingdom walls and burned down their homes, forcing them out into the Forest of Lumatere with the rest of their people. Neighbors fought neighbors. Cattle were slaughtered. Crops were burned. It was a world gone mad.”

Finnikin had watched it all from the Rock Village, clutched in the arms of his great-aunt Celestina. “It’s the end of the world, Finnikin,” she had chanted. “The end of the world.”

“On the second day, the king’s cousin rode into Lumatere with six hundred men, most of them Charynites,” Sir Topher continued. “He had been serving in the Charyn court for almost ten years. With the blessing of the remaining rulers of Skuldenore, who were desperate to keep peace in the region, he was appointed the new king of Lumatere.

“The impostor’s first decree? Any worshipper of the goddess Sagrami was to be put to death for treason. Those known for practicing dark magic were to be burned at the stake. The Lumateran

people were horrified. There was a difference between running the worshippers of Sagrami out of their homes and killing them. But they stood and watched what they had started. One by one over the next three days, men, women, and children were slaughtered, burned in their homes in the Forest of Lumatere. Until the people of Lumatere dreamed crimson dreams and could not walk out of their own homes for the stench of death that blew over their kingdom.”

The novice closed her eyes, even covered her ears for a moment. Finnikin knew there were parts of this story she may never have heard before. No one spoke of those days in any of the exile camps he and Sir Topher visited. Their guilt and despair kept them silent.

“Lumatereans began to leave in droves,” Sir Topher went on. “The Monts, the queen’s people, had already left, gathering every one of their kin and moving them to the safety of the Valley of Tranquillity, outside the kingdom walls, to wait. The noblemen and women of the Flatlands joined them, fearing they would be next on the impostor’s list. Some convinced those in their villages to travel with them. The elders of the Rock Village forbade their people to leave. Strategically, they were the safest, perched high, overlooking the whole kingdom. Many of the River clans followed their Flatland neighbors, while others traveled up the river to Sarnak to seek refuge there until the trouble subsided. By the end of the third day, more than half of Lumatere could be found outside the kingdom walls, either in the Valley of Tranquillity or in Sarnak.

“The next day, the captain of the King’s Guard was called forward to swear allegiance to the new king. In Lumatere, tradition dictated that all should kneel in the presence of the king. Except for the King’s Guard. Since the time the gods walked the

earth, the King's Guard of Lumatere would lie prostrate at the feet of their leader when first in his presence.

"That day, Captain Trevanion refused. It was his belief that the impostor's hands were soaked with the blood of the innocent. And in revenge for the disrespect shown by the captain, the impostor king's men arrested Lady Beatriss, accusing her of treason aided by Trevanion. You see, on the night of the royal murders, the only palace dweller to survive was Beatriss, lady-in-waiting to the princesses. How did she survive such carnage? the impostor king asked. How did the assassins enter a guarded palace if not through the captain of the King's Guard? Of course, deep down, the people of Lumatere did not believe that Beatriss and Trevanion had had anything to do with the murders, but by then everything was in turmoil.

"In front of Trevanion," Sir Topher said, "they tortured her. I heard her screams. They tortured her until Trevanion confessed to treason, confessed to anything, for he knew they would come for his son next."

Finnikin clenched his fist, his fingernails digging into his palms. He watched the novice flinch as if she felt the impact of his nails herself.

"Beatriss was sentenced to death, Trevanion exiled. Some say the king of neighboring Belegonia intervened to save Trevanion's life. But others had a different theory. They thought the impostor king feared an uprising by Trevanion's men. He knew that while their captain was still alive, they would not act."

Finnikin busied himself with cleaning the crossbow. He tried not to think of what took place after his father was taken away. At times it felt like a blur, while other times he remembered it with complete clarity.

"On the fifth day, they dragged Seranonna into the town

square. She was the last of the Forest Dwellers to be put to death, and there was talk that Lady Beatriss would be hanged next. Seranonna's clothes and hands were soaked with blood. Some believed it belonged to the dead child she had delivered of Lady Beatriss in the palace dungeon. Others said it was still Isaboe's blood.

"I was there in the crowd," Sir Topher told the girl. "My king always believed we should not turn our backs on our people as they suffered. I don't think anyone understood the rage Seranonna felt for what had been done to her people. Nor did they understand the extent of her grief for the queen and the royal children."

Finnikin remembered how they dragged Seranonna into the square and she screamed with fury. Screamed the words, "*Beatriss the Beloved is dead!*" And the wails rose around him while Finnikin shook with fear at the sound of her voice. He had heard that voice before. She had spoken to him as he played with Isaboe in the Forest of Lumatere. Spoken words that had haunted him for most of his life.

"And then from her mouth came a curse so fierce that it split the earth," Sir Topher said. "People were screaming, and those not even an arm's length from me disappeared into the crack before it shuddered closed once more. Others ran for the path that led to the main gate. Cottages that were built high over the main road collapsed on top of those fleeing. I saw the blacksmith's entire family disappear beneath the rubble of bricks and mud. Many were trampled trying to reach the gate."

Finnikin shuddered. He remembered the Flatlander who had been holding the rope to keep the gate open, urging his terrified family through. As the gate began to shut, the rope tore at the farmer's hands, and his wife and son were forced to let go. But the man's daughter would not leave him, and Finnikin's last image of Lumatere, as he slid beneath the jaws of the iron gate,

was of a family separated. Then nothing. No sounds from the other side. And then a black mist appearing above the kingdom.

Finnikin felt Evanjalín's eyes on him as Sir Topher put his head in his hands.

"Cursed land. Cursed people."

Slowly Evanjalín picked up the hare again and resumed removing the skin, her hands shaking.

Speak, Finnikin wanted to shout at her. *Lay blame. Shout. Rage. Rage!*

"I think I may have frightened her," Sir Topher murmured in Belegonian.

"You frightened me," said Finnikin.

The fire crackled. Beyond it, the novice Evanjalín continued with her task.

"This year will be our last traveling, Finnikin. If he is alive, Balthazar will have come of age these past two years. If he hasn't appeared by now, he never will."

"You've never believed that he survived," Finnikin said. "She's lying."

"For what reason?"

"A Charyn spy? A vengeful Forest Dweller? Perhaps she believes we will lead her to the heir, so she can kill him out of revenge for her people."

Sir Topher placed a finger to his lips. Their tone was too obvious and they knew little of this girl. "She looks too much like a Mont," he said, switching to Osterian. "The Forest Dwellers were as fair as you, Finnikin. Perhaps she just wants to get home to her people and knows that the only way to survive such a journey is under our protection."

Finnikin felt his agitation rise. "This is a mistake, Sir Topher. We've never trusted anyone to travel with us. *Never.*"

"Yet your eyes stray to her frequently, my boy."

“Out of fury,” Finnikin argued. “We could be doing something of worth. We were summoned to the cloister believing there was *someone* of worth.”

Like Balthazar, he wanted to say. Unlike Sir Topher, he had allowed himself to believe that the messenger would lead them to his beloved friend. And now here they were, burdened with this insignificant girl. Finnikin’s resentment toward her clawed at him.

“I thought you liked them fragile,” Sir Topher said, smiling. “I saw how you flirted with Lord Tascan’s daughter, Lady Zarah.”

“I prefer them sweet, not simple, and I like to hear their voices,” Finnikin corrected. “And a little refinement would be nice.”

He looked sideways at the novice. She was removing the entrails of the hare, her tongue resting between her teeth in her deep concentration. *A simpleton indeed*, Finnikin thought bitterly.

They ate dinner in silence. Later, the girl sat with her arms around her knees, shivering. Perhaps Sir Topher was right and the story she had been told would plague her sleep. In that way they were the same, Finnikin mused, for lately his sleep no longer seemed to belong to him. Usually his dreams were of the river, of traveling down it in a barge with his father. Other times he dreamed of Lady Beatriss and her soft lulling voice and the love he had seen between her and Trevanion. But from the moment the messenger had arrived to summon them to the cloister in Sendecane, Finnikin’s dreams had been filled with carnage. And tonight he was consumed with images of the novice Evanjalín, her hands soaked with the blood of the hare, screaming as she was burned alive. Screaming the name that had escaped her lips each night this past week.

Balthazar.