

**The Darkseeing Stars**  
a novel of The Dark Crystal

by E. C. Ambrose

"To the darkseeing stars went the void all around them"  
~~from *The Covenants of Thra*, by Fellen the Elder

Chapter 1	For a Song .....	4
Chapter 2	A Traitor Revealed.....	14
Chapter 3	The Broken Crystal.....	22
Chapter 4	Adrift on the Crystal Sea.....	28
Chapter 5	Sky Full of Heroes .....	36
Chapter 6	A Short, Sharp Flight .....	48
Chapter 7	The Stars in Blood .....	52
Chapter 8	Shipbreaker .....	62
Chapter 9	Mist and Viper .....	73
Chapter 10	Spiral and Ash.....	82
Chapter 11	Aishynn's Reward .....	91
Chapter 12	Raunip's Orb .....	100
Chapter 13	The Footsteps of Jarra-Jen .....	111
Chapter 14	A Tale in Two Voices .....	118
Chapter 15	The Chaiads' Nest .....	128
Chapter 16	Aughra's Hill .....	137
Chapter 17	The Apprentice of Lies .....	144
Chapter 18	To Silence Thunder.....	153
Chapter 19	Dreaming in Stone .....	161
The End.....		169

## Chapter 1 For a Song

The traitor came on a ship of bone that sailed upon the Crystal Sea. Great sails of shimmering white crowned the sandship's masts. Sunset painted the cloth in gold and gleaming rose, and Hali, high upon Watcher's Hill, could just make out the tiny silhouettes of Dousani gelflings tending the sails and the lines. But the masts themselves! Sweeping needles of bone, so sharp at the tip they might have pierced the very fabric that they held, broadening into a solid base, shaped like the delicate finger bones of bats, bats the size of which she never hoped to see. From there, the sandship spread into a narrow deck manned by figures swathed in the same cloth. A great keel of carved bone cut aside the tiny crystals of the Sea like so much water, and she could just hear the tinkling sound of that crystal spray as the ship surged forward and finally disappeared from view beneath the overhanging stones and tangle vines of Hali's high perch. Watcher's Hill overlooked an edge of the Crystal Sea, where it came to the rough ground that rose steadily into the forest. A clever gelfling—and hopefully no other creature--could follow the trail through moving trees and stony creatures to find the Gathering, the union of Clans that would decide the fate of all.

It was Hali's task to blow the horn to announce the traitor's arrival, to say that one of the last two clans they awaited had arrived, but, for a moment, she was too thunderstruck by what she saw to do anything but lower her flute and gape.

"Is to play, yes?"

Startled from her fascination, Hali gripped the flute in her hand and gave a quick shake of her head. "I'm sorry, I can't play anymore tonight—Just one note." She pushed off from the turstone where she sat and the creature gave a little grunt. Tucking away the flute in her belt, she took up instead the curving mounder's horn, rough and heavy in her hands, its tip notched to make an instrument.

"No, not this—a little longer, please? Or to sing, please?"

Hali avoided glancing at her companion, shrouded in cloth like the Dousani who rode the Crystal Sea. The sound of his voice still grated on her ears, and she couldn't imagine he believed the cloth concealed him. When he did not speak, she could pretend he wasn't there any more—that she, too, was not concealing him. "I can't, truly," she told him. "You should go."

The shrouded one gave a sigh. "Go, and go, and there is no home for me beneath the stars, but when I hear your song."

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Hali frowned down at her flute. Thanks to her father's teaching and her mother's encouragement, she played well—they teased her as a child that she should one day play for the queen, and she hoped, at the Gathering, to make this dream into truth.

How would her parents feel knowing she used her gifts instead to play for such a one as this? Would they hear the same plaintive notes in his harsh voice, or was it only her sensitive ears—or worse, her imaginative mind—that made it so?

No matter--she had to get rid of him, once and for all, before she got in terrible trouble, but then he said a thing like that, so sadly, and she hated to turn him away from the music, the love that they—most unexpectedly--shared. Surely one more day couldn't

hurt? "I'll be back on watch tomorrow, after the second sun rises—but it must be the last time."

"Mmmm." He withdrew, his coverings rippling against the stone. "Tomorrow."

Squaring her shoulders, Hali turned resolutely from the path he followed and lifted the mounder's horn in both hands. She blew long and hard, a great moan of sound that echoed down the slopes around her. Faintly down below, she heard a few shouts, the rustle of feet as they prepared to receive the ship of the Dousani. The traitor's ship. Her heart quickened. A madman, they said, and yet they summoned him here as a witness to the truth.

"Hey-oh, Hali-oh," called a puffing voice from below and she whirled about to see Neryd, a chubby, hairy Drencheni from the swamps clomping his way up the hill. Had he seen her cloaked companion on the trail? Surely not, or he would have sounded an alarm himself.

"Cast lots to see who took the watch." Neryd grimaced. "I lost." He staggered the last few steps as the turstone waddled over to meet him. He plopped onto the creature's back and gasped, one hand pressed to his chest.

"Then I can go?" She glanced back to see the sails of the sandship glide from view toward the docks.

"Aye, yes." Neryd slumped. "You'll see the Dousani and I won't. You'll see the traitor, and I won't. You'll hear the tale and I won't." He took a deep breath and added, "Not that I've the strength to get back down, now I've made it all the way here, unless I get a good long rest-up first."

"Thanks! I'll tell you everything I hear at firstsun!"

"Go on." He flapped a hand at her, but she could see the edge of a smile as she handed over the mounder's horn.

Each clan gave a few to join the Watchers, set at the boundaries and high places, to alert the Gathering to new arrivals. Two clans had yet to arrive, until today, with the Dousani of the Crystal Sea bringing their traitor, but the Grottan were still absent, so the Watchers were needed, in case anyone else arrived. Anyone. That hard lump returned to Hali's throat as she thought of her earlier visitor, but she shook it off and hopped up a few stones to the very edge of the crag. Tossing her cape straight down her back, Hali leapt into the air.

For a moment, she let the wind rush against her face, the spice of the Crystal Sea mingling on the breeze with the rich earth of the forest below. She spread her wings to either side and tipped gracefully into turn, gliding down and down, spiraling past the tanglevines that twisted in vain to reach her. A swarm of flyters burst around her, chittering madly, their own wings buzzing as they fled her path. Hali laughed through them, reaching out, her hands and arms tickled by the little puffs that tipped their tails. What could be better than flight? Except, maybe, music. She pulled in her wings and prepared to land, catching herself on both feet with a slight stumble on a broad stone between towering dertres. With a rumble, their branches shifted in again, poking at one another, probably mad that she had disturbed the flyters.

"Sorry!" she called up to them as she trotted away. Her feet, too, seemed to take flight. With the Dousani here at last, surely the queen would be revealed, and Hali's dream would be that much closer to reality.

By the time she reached the Gathering place, a basin where the turstones sometimes rested and lay their eggs, it was already filling with gelflings of all clans. The Spriton insisted on an equal division of the basin they had claimed, laying out seven meticulously even spaces, in spite of the fact that her own clan, those of the Woodlands, were the most numerous, while the distant Dousani and the cave-dwelling Grottan hadn't even arrived, and the Vapra sent so few members that they had room for a herd of mounds and a few tents besides. What could you expect from Spriton anyhow? They claimed to honor fairness, but how was it fair that they placed their own clan alongside the elegant Vapra, probably hoping to win approval from the matriarchs for more dreamfastings with that clan.

Hali paused to watch the Vapra descending. Their men, tall with white hair and bright eyes, walked together while the women glided in upon gossamer wings, nearly as gleaming as those sails against the sunset. Her own wings, pale green as new-made leaves, served her well enough, but the Vapra. . .their beauty made her heart ache. Sighing to herself, Hali acknowledged the truth. She couldn't be one of them, but she still hoped to dreamfast with one—to be partnered with someone so magnificent and bright, to learn the skills of camouflage, to study the grace of their flight and their music. She thought of her hand joined with his, that imaginary one, sharing the rush of memory and emotion, the joy of discovering another, the love that bonded the dreamfasted, forever. Matriarchs, let it be so!

A loud chime startled her, a sustained note that lingered in the forest, and she turned from the Gathering.

Up the trail from the Sea came a small party of Dousani, only their dark hands revealed by the draped fabrics they wore. Such fabric! It looked as fine as spider silk, drifting around them as they moved. The one in front carried a pair of long crystal points and occasionally struck them together, producing a single sharp note that hovered in the air and alerted the other gelflings to their approach. A few members of the Sifa joined them, each tapping the charm she wore about her neck. Their leader stopped a few paces short and spread her wings, time-worn and silver-grey as the ocean where they lived, showing herself to be the matriarch of the sailors.

The second Dousani stepped out of line and swayed a moment, her eyes, visible through a slit in her coverings, looking troubled, then she raised her hands and slipped aside a draping of cloth, drew a deep breath, and spread her wings as well, a shimmer as if a new sun rose, drawing a gasp from the other gelflings present. The Dousani matriarch's golden wings dazzled Hali so that she blinked and squinted as the matriarchs finished their greeting with an exchange of earth, a vial of sea water for a small pouch that tinkled with crystals. How strange that these things were the earth of the other clans, shared with strangers, as if to share their treasured home.

The Dousani matriarch accepted the vial of seawater with a slight dip of her wings, her eyes glossy as if she had received a very great gift indeed, then she offered a small vial of her own, her hand extending slowly, as if reluctant.

The Sifa matriarch accepted it with equal reverence. "From one who dwells in the desert, the gift of water is a treasure indeed. Thank you, honored one."

Then the Dousani matriarch began to dance. Or, at least, her arms did, her hands sweeping and fluttering, dark against the brightness of her wings.

The Sifa raised her own hands, but in a gesture that begged for patience. "Please, honored one," she said when the Dousani froze, rigid. "These aging eyes need more time. I do respect your language, but to translate it for the others, I must ask you to speak more slowly. Unless there is any among you dreamfasted to one who can speak for you?"

At the back of their matriarch, the other Dousani made a brief rustle, perhaps caused only by the swishing of their cloaks, but Hali couldn't help imagining they were upset. A few quick gestures flashed among them, one to another, but they said nothing at all.

The Dousani matriarch's wings flickered in dismay, and Hali tensed. What would happen if they were so offended they simply left, taking the traitor with them? Then, the stealthy thought that whispered at her heart, perhaps it would be better so. The Dousani were so. . . queer, so unlike other gelflings that they would be barely able to participate in the Gathering, and Hali couldn't imagine how they'd get the traitor to confirm the truth they'd all come here to learn.

With a slow, graceful movement of her hand, the Dousani settled her wings again into the posture of greeting before she began her speech, in careful strokes, less like dancing than embroidery, as if she stitched her silent words upon the air.

"The Matriarch Shennai brings the greetings of her people," said the Sifa matriarch, turning slightly to address the Gathering. "She brings among them the one we have sought, although she doubts we shall find him of any aid to the Gathering." She watched and nodded, then spoke again, "This one is crystal-struck—a madman," the Sifa woman supplied, "as we shall shortly see." With a shrug, she set that aside and squared

herself again. "I am the Matriarch Tiel, of the Sifa, and I am proud to welcome you, and pleased to make your silent voices heard."

The ritual completed, the two matriarchs lowered their wings, Shennai with a gesture that ruffled her cloak back in place, concealing the golden glory of those wings.

"You say that we shall soon know the truth of the traitor's madness, Matriarch. Will you speak more of this?" Tiel asked.

Shennai spoke at length, beginning too quickly, as before, and slowing again so that Tiel could watch and read her hands. "This one went to the Crystal Castle to learn from the scientist there and to share in knowledge of crystal powers. This one knows the hearts of sandships and how to make them fly across the Sea, and the scientist would know such things. It was many moons since he was gone, and suddenly he returns to us, blind by day, confused by our ways, by darkness, crazed. At night, he babbles, shrieks and. . .you shall hear what else. He is. . ." Shennai paused, her hands hovering, then finally, reluctantly, her wince revealed around her eyes, she said, "loud."

A few of the other Dousani, too, winced behind their drapery, and made little gestures like the Sifa did when they warded bad luck.

Shennai continued, through Tiel's voice. "Worse than this, and why we call him traitor, when we tried to aid him, he walked by night and broke the heart of his tribe's sandship, causing it to wreck upon the rocks, injuring many, and more when he attacked them with his own hands. This is. . .abhorrent to us, and yet, we know not what afflicts him, or what may be done for him."

Darkness spread around them as she spoke, and Woodlanders moved with torches, lighting the clearing as an awkward silence fell. A traitor to his own people, a

man who ruined the ships that sustained them. Hali peered at the small group of Dousani at Shennai's back, trying to see which one he might be.

"We would have cast his boat upon the sea, but for the summons from the Gathering, and Rian's message asking to see him, and so we brought him here, although we do not think you will find him of use. There is no more use in him to any gelfling now."

Then a sound arose from among her silent people. One of the shrouded heads tipped back and laughed, a bright peal of laughter that, to Hali's musical ear, rang rather less with humor than despair. The other Dousani leaned away from that one, and Shennai gave a shudder that needed no translation.

"Honored one, permit me—I am Rian, who asked you here." Rian stepped forward through the throng of gelfling, broad-shouldered and brave as any Spriton warrior, yet he was a Woodlander like Hali herself. His sword swung upon his hip, and he set a strong hand upon it to stop the movement.

"You speak as though this madman is a traitor to yourselves alone, but it's not so." His voice carried through the sudden hush. "We all came here to speak of the skeksis threat, to speak of the truth, that they are evil, working not to aid us, not to help you make better ships or the Drenchen to farm more lizards—no! When a gelfling goes to the castle for their—aid—he snarled the word—"it is the gelfling who is lost, ruined! The skeksis have blackened the Crystal of Truth. They use its power to suck the strength from gelfling souls. I've seen it."

A murmur of anger and fear rose across the Gathering. This, indeed, was what brought them here, Rian's testimony against the skeksis, and their own furtive reckoning

of how many gelflings had already gone missing. The more he spoke, the more gelflings believed him, his words spreading as others revealed some small thing they'd seen, some half-heard conversation between skeksis that suggested evil. Hali wrapped her arms about her, drawing her cloak tight against the chill of night, and the awful weight of her own betrayal.

"They gather our souls into a liquid, a drink of shining blue, to be devoured for their own strength and power. They feed off us as flyters drink from flowers."

"So you say, Woodlander," called the Spriton matriarch, Alandra, setting her hands upon her own twin sword-hilts, "but we've still only your word for it. Your voice and a thousand whispers. The skeksis have aided us to build better forges. Why would they allow us our weapons, encourage us, even, if they planned to—what, to slay us all? It makes no sense."

"That's why I asked Shennai to bring the traitor here, before the Gathering. I've seen the skeksis stealing souls and leaving nothing but withered husks behind. I've seen it, and so has he."

Alandra merely stared. "His own matriarch calls him a madman, and you heard that—that laughter! What can we expect to learn from a creature like that?"

Rian shook his head not allowing the Spriton to dig at him. "I've only seen the essence, the spirit torn from some poor gelfling—but the traitor drank it."

## Chapter 2    A Traitor Revealed

Hali recoiled at that, her hand clutched to her mouth. She'd been among the first to see Rian when he fled the castle, abandoning his guard post to warn his clan. His eyes swam with dread, his hands trembling as he spoke the truth. The other Dousani slipped aside, even the matriarch, leaving that one shrouded figure, its shoulders still shaking with a wave of laughter—or maybe with tears, who could tell under that cloak?

"How can we question it? We can't even see it," the Spriton Alandra complained.

"Too bad the cave-dwelling Grottans haven't shown up yet, they see just fine in the dark," muttered a Drenchen who had come up beside her. "Most of us are already convinced, honored one, and ready to act. It's only you Spritons who still need convincing. The rest of us came here to plan for war."

Shennai gestured, speaking sharply to the traitor, but he gave no response, expect to sway harder.

"What does she say?" Alandra demanded.

"She asks him to remove his cloak, that he can be seen by the Gathering," Tiel translated.

"Just take it from him." The Spriton matriarch jumped forward, hands outstretched, but the Dousani traitor spun away, cloth rippling in his wake. With a bound, the Spriton stomped on one edge of cloth, and the traitor stumbled and rolled, his

cloak unfurling behind him, trapped beneath the Spriton's foot. Alandra seized the cloak and flung it toward the forest, out of reach.

Tumbling in a blur of long, black hair, the Dousani traitor rolled to a stop at Hali's feet. She gasped, but the press of the crowd held her there. The traitor curled away, fiercely pushing back his hair.

"Don't touch me," he said, barely more than a whisper, his voice hoarse from hard use. "Please, for the sake of your soul, don't touch me." He glanced back at her over his shoulder, a look that mingled fear and determination, his face dark and strange and strong, a young man, little older than herself, with a raised, pink scar that marred one cheek. His eyes glittered dark and deep, his jaw clenched as if he faced some terrible foe—but it was only her, only Hali, Watcher, girl of the Woodlands, singer, flute-player, and, if Rian spoke the truth, a traitor herself.

Hali swallowed hard. "I won't," she whispered back.

A shadow cut the torchlight before them, the Spriton looming up, arching her silvery wings, and the traitor spun away, scrambling to his feet, one of the Spriton's little knives clenched in his fist and boldly thrust out to keep her away. "Don't touch me," he said again, in a stronger tone.

"Fine—then tell me, since it seems you can speak, have you drunk the essence of a gelfling?" Alandra glared down at the traitor with all the might of her clan, all the fury of the gelflings gathering to support her. She leaned in, and he lunged at her, forcing her back again.

For a moment, she circled with the traitor, her long swords glinting, her face the more furious because he dared defy her. She did not bother to disarm him—not yet,

letting him keep the stolen blade so she might take it back at the moment of her choosing. He wore a simple tunic and trousers, yet without his cloak, he looked naked, stripped before his people and every gelfling present.

"Speak up, traitor, have you drunk it? Have you slurped the soul of a Spriton or sipped on the spirit of a Sifa?"

It seemed a little absurd, when she put it like that. And if Rian had been mistaken, somehow, then Hali's own betrayal meant nothing at all. A few in the audience chuckled, and the Spriton seemed to grow larger, strutting in a circle around the traitor. "Did you drink a Drenchen, or devour a Vapra?" She leaned in, her weapons gleaming in the torchlight, his tiny blade lifted in response. "Have you gobbled a Grottan? Quaffed a Woodlander? Maybe one of Rian's kin? Or, matriarchs forgive you, have you dined on a Dousani—a member of your own clan?"

"I don't know!" the traitor shouted at last, tossing back his hair, facing his taunter. "I don't know. I don't know—and I never, never will." He cast aside the knife to clatter across the stone.

The Gathering fell silent, and the Spriton stood there, poised, but speechless.

"Never, never, never, never, never!" the traitor's voice cracked, but he kept on, swaying with every repetition of his terrible chant. His hands crept up to his hair, clutching his skull as if to make his voice stop, but it went on, "never, never, never," a miserable muttering that made Hali's eyes sting and her teeth ache.

"So you did drink it?" Rian said, his tone of quiet command overriding the traitor's rant.

The man gave no answer, not aloud, but his hands trembled free of his hair and struggled to form gestures, writhing as if his fingers were all broken, and the Dousani matriarch shook her head, spreading her hands in a few simple words. "Nonsense. He makes nonsense."

"And yet," said Tiel, the Sifa matriarch, "He never denied it. Heart of Thra defend us all! His words. . .if I may interpret, it seems to me. . .that he did what Rian claims, and it is only that he does not know who, which," she broke off, her tanned skin looking pale about the eyes and lips as she swallowed. "He drank the essence, he knows not of whom."

A hiss of anger swelled and the Spriton drew her swords with an echo of metal. "Then allow me to send him back to Thra. If his worthless life can serve no purpose, at least his corpse can feed the trees."

The Dousani matriarch flared open her wings, with a sharp gesture that spoke louder than a cry. Her hands flew too fast, but the Sifa stumbled through a translation, "Not our way, not for gelfling to kill gelfling have we come—not even for a traitor. Please do not let his shame any more stain this place."

"She's right, honored one," said Rian. "Let him be dealt with in the way of his own people. Let us convene the Gathering and ask the wisdom of all the matriarchs. We are grateful for the Dousan clan to join us, and we can only hope the Grottans will soon come as well—but we can't wait for them any longer. We must prepare for war."

"What about the queen?" the Drenchen asked. "Do we wait for her?"

"I believe she is already here, my friend. She will reveal herself if need be. In the meantime, we must do what we can."

Rian lead the way, most of the others following him down into the circle, returning to their clans, although, for a moment, they had been mingled each with each.

"If you require any assistance, my clan stands ready," said the Spriton, addressing the Dousani matriarch, still gripping her swords.

Shennai's hands moved and Tiel translated, "We cannot set him adrift by night, but by dawn, we will do it. Will your people aid us to guard him until then?"

"Of course." Alandra gave a tip of her head, then, still looking toward the ground, cocked it to one side, her eyes tracking something. "Do your people have tails?"

Shennai's wings flared at that, her face going stern, but the Spriton leapt past her, seizing the cloak of one at the back of the Dousani group, barely seen in the torchlight. The figure beneath gave a harsh cry and whipped about, hissing through its beak.

A skeksis! Its black, feathered head lunged, snapping toward the Spriton. It reared up, towering over the gelfling, two arms flailing out, two more twisted limbs, withered by lack of use, bent close to its back like damaged wings. Hali felt ill, her arms clutched across her stomach, her own wings shivering.

"Don't hurt me!" it cried. "Just to listen, yes? Just to know what gelflings need, to help them, yes? That's all—to help gelflings!"

"To help yourself to gelflings!" the Spriton snarled in return, facing down the skeksis though it loomed twice as tall. Some of her clansmen pushed up through the scattering crowd, surrounding the creature, bristling with weapons.

The skeksis collapsed into itself, whimpering and pleading.

"Kill it now—before it kills any more of us!" cried a voice from the crowd, but it spoke for many.

Alandra lunged and sliced, the clumsy skeksis moving too late, its tail swinging about. One of the blades cut across its side, severing the ragged lace of its filthy jacket and drawing a streak of dark blood. The skeksis shrieked and Hali clamped her hands over her ears, the sound was so cruel.

From across the clearing, that shriek merged with another sound, a penetrating tone that stirred Hali's very bones, resonant with pain, and unlike any voice she had ever heard before.

The skeksis only howled more, but the gelflings tensed, the other Spriton warriors turning aside to face this new threat. On the rim of the great forest bowl where they made their Gathering stood a creature Hali had never seen before, as tall as a skeksis, but straight where the skeksis was bent. Instead of withered limbs, the creature had four lean, strong arms, one holding a staff that dangled with shells and stones, the others held out in a posture of peace and calm. It wore a long coat of earthen tones from pale bone to the deep copper of a stony stream, a coat which lay down the length of its tail, decorated with careful knots and spirals, and wrapped its narrow shoulders all the way up its long neck, framing a face with deep-set eyes, hair the color of autumn grass, an open, curious face, but its expression twitched from a friendly smile, ever so briefly, to a flinch of pain. Whatever this thing was, the skeksis' wailing hurt its ears as well as hers. Nevertheless, the thing maintained its tone, that low thrumming, and the skeksis subsided into an aggrieved whimpering while the gelfling horde readied their weapons—the swords of Spriton and Woodland guards, the long spears of the Dousani, the Drenchen and the Sifa brandishing whatever tools or stones they could. The Vapra, as one, had vanished, blending in with the forest around them, ready to strike.

Hali gripped her flute as if it, too, could be used to harm, but she felt a fierce pride in those around her. For the first time, she believed the Gathering could, indeed, take these peoples and make them one—even if the reclusive Grottans never did arrive.

"Him!" shrieked the skeksis into the tension. "He! He is a wizard, a wicked thing! Do you not know of these things? Monsters, living who knows where. It is they who would destroy you, not I, no!"

"How did they get here? Either of them?" The Spriton matriarch shouted. "Where are the Watchers?"

Hali's breath caught at her throat as she stepped forward, displaying the crimson badge of the Watchers. Around the circle, two dozen more stepped forward likewise, glancing at one another uncertainly, shrugging, shaking their heads, or standing silent, waiting for their reprimand. It was their task to watch, and one of them, at least, had failed.

"What is that?" Alandra pointed her sword at the newcomer, which continued to stand, patiently, but falling silent at last. "Where did it come from?"

"And how did a skeksis get so close to us? Thanks to the Podlings and their wildspeak, the forest weaves itself around us--how did it even find the Gathering?" Rian asked.

Tiel, her fingers rubbing over one of the charms she wore about her belt, glanced back. "The ripples on the stream of evening part around them all. I would guess the traitor revealed us. Somehow, the traitor told it where to come."

With a growl that chilled Hali skin and bone, the Spriton matriarch surged back toward the traitor, swords cutting the torch smoke to shreds as she came on.

Tears stung Hali's eyes, but she cried, "Wait! Honored one, wait. It wasn't him—it was me."

### Chapter 3    The Broken Crystal

She hated most of all the hard expression on Rian's face as they stared down at her, but she clutched her flute in both hands and forced herself to tell the truth. To be sure, the traitor's life was already forfeit, but how should she face the matriarchs if she let him be sent away with this false blame against him atop his other crimes? "It, the skeksis, it comes to listen to me. While I'm on watch, I sing and I play my flute, to keep busy."

She faltered, but Tiel murmured, "You're not the only one, go on."

Hali explained, "Four nights ago, I was finishing a song, and heard a sound, a crackle in the woods. I called out, and I even picked up the mounder's horn, to call for aid, but it asked me not to. It said it loved my music, and asked if I would play again."

"Deceivers all," said Rian.

"You did play on," Tiel supplied, softly.

Hali nodded, but she felt like weeping. Only now did she see what she had done. Not only had she allowed it to come to her, to linger close by, but she had allowed its professed love of music to sway her better judgment. "It wore robes, and stayed in the forest. I could never see it clearly, but. . ."

"You knew what it was."

"I guessed." She met the Sifa matriarch's gentle but commanding gaze. "It came back, to hear more. Sometimes it would. . . croon." Remembering that mournful sound,

so different from the dreadful shrieks and whimpering of tonight, she gripped the flute against her thundering heart.

"And it might have seen or followed you here."

She wanted to claim otherwise, to claim that her flight would prevent that, but could she be sure? She was too trusting, wanting to think that music could make even a lying monster somehow better than it was. "Yes, honored one."

"Send her with the other," said Alandra.

"For an error in judgment?" Tiel replied.

"An error is singular—she had four days to admit the mistake and come to us for judgment. Four days is no mistake, it's a habit, and one that we cannot afford to permit. We cannot afford to be divided by this, certainly not while we face whatever that thing is across the way and determine how many enemies we face." Alandra swung about to glare at Hali. "Did you lead that other creature to us, as well?"

"No! I've never seen it. . .but—" She flicked a glance among them. "I remember the stories, that there were others, strangers, who dwelt in secret among the stones, working magic and singing of the stars."

"skeksis stories," Rian murmured, and studied the creature who remained a solemn presence across the Gathering. "If the skeksis warned us against them, it may well be that they are the ones we need, the one who will help us to defeat the tyrants."

"Legends," Alandra said. "Like Jarra-Jen's Horn of Thunder, a thing we've always heard of but never beheld. We cannot place stock in stories any more—we must face our enemies together."

"United," Rian said, meeting the Spriton Matriarch's cool gaze. "Then you are with us, honored one, in spite of my story, and the fact that a Woodlander tells it?"

"The traitor's presence compels me to believe."

Shannai, the Dousani Matriarch suddenly flared her wings, her eyes wide, and gestured toward the distant stranger. She made a slow series of movements, her hands circling, spiraling, coming together, and tears gleamed at the corners of her eyes.

"She, he." Tiel shook her head with a tinkle of the charms woven into her hair. "She understands him. We've thought he was silent, but he's moving, very carefully. She says it is like poetry to watch him, like the stars are weaving." Tiel laughed, a quiet echo of delight. "He says we cannot kill the skeksis without upsetting the balance, the stars themselves. He asks if we have seen Aughra or know what her devices say. He says a great song is in the making, and it is we who will do the singing." Tearing her eyes from the stranger, she said, "We must hear him and know what he has to tell us."

"Then let us be done with traitors and listen with cool hearts and open eyes," said Alandra. "What should we do with the Woodlander?"

Rian, a Woodlander like Hali herself, almost matched the Spriton's distant appraisal as they studied Hali, but she could not miss the note of regret in his tone when he spoke at last. "We have no justice like that of the Dousani, to expel someone who injures the clan."

"Not merely the clan, but all gelflings."

Acknowledging this with a dip of his head, Rian sighed, "Our matriarch remains ill—she suffers from dangerous dreams, or she should be here to make such a choice."

"Then let her share the Dousani's justice." Tiel displayed a small medallion of a ship at sea. "At least neither must then sail alone beyond the stars."

The three matriarchs let their wings rise, in token of decisions shared, and Hali's heart fell even before the Spriton set her shoulders and aimed her fierce gaze at Hali. "If we send them to the dock, they'll not hear our counsels, and they'll have nothing to tell their skeksis lords."

"I'm not—I've never told them anything," Hali protested.

"And what has the skeksis learned without your even saying? It found us here—what else does it know? It might have already sent messages to the castle to alert its fellows."

"We should move the Gathering," said Rian suddenly. "It's the best way to be sure we're not discovered again."

"What about that?" Alandra pointed toward the skeksis, which was doing its best to seem small and unremarkable.

"Send it to Aughra. If she's home, she'll help us, won't she? She'll at least know how to hold and watch over it."

"I don't believe she is at home, but her aid would surely help us now." With a series of whistles, Alandra summoned groups of armed Spritons to form up around the prisoners. When they started toward Hali, she stumbled before them, finding herself steps from the traitor, herded downhill before she could even see what became of the skeksis or the stranger who moved with such eloquence that he moved the matriarchs to tears. Her own tears were too strong by then, her own fears swelling within her into a blackness deeper than the forest that held them.

"What does it mean to be cast adrift?" she asked, but neither the Spriton soldiers nor their Dousani escorts would answer.

Curled into her cape, Hali slept fitfully at the shore of the Crystal Sea. For most of the night, the traitor muttered, growled and shouted all night long, sometimes springing up to launch himself at their Spriton guards and be repelled, falling to the sand, crying out against them. He moved faster than most of the Spritons, but they kept their vigil with ferocious intensity, and he did not again get hold of a weapon.

The traitor must have fallen silent at last, for Hali woke with tiny crystals clinging to her eyes and lips, carried in upon the breezes of the night. She brushed them away and nearly wept again at the sight of dawn. It was the silent Dousani who now brought them down to where a tiny boat waited between the hulks of the huge sandships, a boat barely large enough for one, formed of narrow slats of bone set close to keep out the sands, with a little case at its center. This, the Dousani matriarch opened, after a series of gestures.

"I don't understand, honored one," Hali tried, but none spoke to her, not even the traitor whose whispering had disturbed her dreams.

Taking two slender crystal shards, one in each hand, Shannai rapped them together, end to end. One crystal, a deep red just beginning to glow with the dawn, gave out a low chime. The other cracked within, scars shivering down deep until the thing looked as if it must shatter, but it held together. Shannai gripped this in her hand, her arm quivering as if the crystal had some inner motion, and the Spriton guards prodded Hali into the boat. The traitor leapt in of his own accord when they approached him, and Hali remembered his plea that they shouldn't touch him—and his speed when Alandra would have struck off his head.

"What's his name? At least tell me that—if I'm to die with him—" or be killed by him, Hali thought—"at least I need to know his name." She clutched the smooth bone of the boat's gunnel, leaning so far that one of the Spritons growling and urged her back.

The Dousani matriarch lowered her hand with the broken crystal into the little box at the boat's center, setting it into a frame of metal and bone. The moment she released it, the boat gave a shimmy and nearly sprang free of the powerful Dousani sailors who held its line. Shannai closed the box and drew back.

"Please!" Hali cried, spreading her hand as the sailors pulled free the line.

The matriarch plucked her veil from her mouth and whispered, "Aishynn was his name—when he was alive and a gelfling."

By the last word, the tiny boat surged so quickly onward, that Hali had to cling to both sides, her hair blown back, her face to the rising heat, staring at the traitor who shared her fate, the man so evil his clan claimed him already dead.

## Chapter 4    **Adrift on the Crystal Sea**

All that long morning, Hali simply flipped up the hood of her cloak and huddled in it, imagining what she might have done differently. Would she turn back the skeksis the first time he stopped to listen to her? Would she lure him in with lies of her own and reveal him to the matriarchs, making herself a hero like Rian? Yet his hopeless crooning stayed with her, echoing in her memory when she brushed her fingers down her flute—one of a handful of possessions she carried with her unto death. That sound, a low, despairing tone, as if he tried to remember what it was to sing at all, as if his heavy beak and scrawny neck struggled to produce a melody, any tune at all. She wished they had allowed her to see her own matriarch before she left, to sort through the tangle of emotion that weighed her down. Instead, she would carry that, like the wooden flute her father made her, unto death, baked in the tiny boat, smothered in the Crystal Sea, strangled by the traitor's agile hands.

Hali stared down at her own hands, no longer trembling, pale and strong from weaving, playing, scrambling the rocks and trees of her home, still as capable as ever in spite of her helplessness. Taking up the flute, Hali wet her lips and began to play, softly at first, a tune to lull a baby, then louder and with spirit, her fingers tapping the holes, music swelling in her soul, filling her ears, her heart, her mind until she imagined it pouring from her very skin and stirring the Crystal Sea to weep in shining tears. She was

neither dead nor evil, by the shade of the forest and the heart of the hills, she was not, and while her heart still beat and her fingers played, she could dream another life.

Tossing back her hood, Hali stared around her at the Crystal Sea, rolling back in tinkling waves of tiny shards and bits of sand, pulsing with heat, shimmering in endless reflections so that she squinted against the glare and suddenly understood the unusual shape of Dousani eyes.

Across the boat, the traitor leaned forward, arms braced upon the bow, wind whipping through his black hair, shining like a shadow of the Sea. She'd caught him at an angle, as if just glancing back, his profile smooth and, for once, relaxed—unafraid—his eyes closed against the wind of their movement. That corner of his mouth tipped up, almost a smile, gentle, sad, so very distant, no longer the face of a madman, a murderer, a drinker of souls.

"Aishynn," Hali croaked, then coughed, suddenly feeling her parched throat and dry lips. The music had done no good for that, in any case.

The smile vanished and he jumped a little, swinging about with that startling grace to face her, an edge of white at his eyes.

The coughing went on, racking her chest and throat, and she pressed her arm to her mouth, the flute jabbing her cheek until she flung it down, doubling over with the fit. The boat swayed and she grabbed the gunnels, panting as the fit ebbed, leaving her gasping, weak and thirsty. Her moment of hope ebbed with it. Only a few hours, and already her body weakened. How long could she go without food? without water? She wanted to weep, but she could not spare the tears. Instead, she pressed her fingers against

her eyes, easing back until the feeling left her, opening her eyes again and immediately jerking away, the bone rubbing her wings.

Aishynn crouched just beyond the box, so near he might have touched her, his scarred face creased with concern.

"What—"she began, then clamped a hand over her mouth, her throat still raw from coughing.

With a sharp gesture, the traitor reinforced her silence, continuing to a series of movements more cautious, finally lifting his other hand, holding out her flute. Hali stared, glance flicking from the instrument to his face. Shoulders slumped, Aishynn placed the flute upon the box between them and retreated to his own end, squeezing his lean form into the sharp bow, resting his unscarred cheek against the slats of bone. Shooting out her hand, Hali snatched the flute and thrust it into her belt.

For a long time, they sat that way, the boat streaking through the Crystal Sea, leaving low mounds of shimmering sand behind, she afraid to close her eyes, he no longer peaceful in spite of shutting his eyes. Heat pushed down at her from the double suns, reflected over and again by the Crystal Sea, throbbing at her in the silence. She tried again to wet her lips, sorry now that she had wasted what little moisture remained to her in playing music. Her heart settled again as she reasoned her way back from panic. No wonder the Dousani spoke with their hands, for every breath parched the body of its water. But how did they ever get more? Springs, rivers, pools in the endless sand? Aishynn would know. From what they said, he was a master of ships, before he broke them, one who knew the way of crystals.

Swallowing as best she could, Hali composed her words in her mind before speaking, taking deliberate care. No need to be polite, not with him, not given their circumstances. If she must persuade him to help, so be it, until then, she would save her breath. Scooting a little forward on her numb legs, Hali rapped on the box.

Aishynn startled and stared back at her, sweat dripping down his face and arms.

Cupping her hands, Hali raised them to her mouth as if drinking, then held them up, shaking them, making him see her crude gesture and recognize her need.

The traitor tipped his head, brushing back his hair, pinning it in one hand out of the wind.

"Water," she said. "We'll die."

The slightest nod. That was rather the point, after all, of being cast adrift, his expression implied.

Hali conjured within herself a spine of metal and a heart full of stars. "I don't want to die."

His free hand rose, hesitated, made a series of small gestures, far from the rich language of movements his matriarch revealed last night.

"You can speak," she prompted, coughing a little as if to belie her words.

Aishynn gestured to his mouth, his throat, the suns blazing in the sky overhead.

"Fine then!" she croaked. "Forget it—let us bake in silence!" She flung herself back to her side, curling up, pulling the cloak back over to give her some protection from the heat. For a time, she heard him rustling about, then silence. Sleep never came, leaving her to run her fingers over the bone of the boat, finding it mostly smooth, slightly slivered here and there, a few of the top slats beginning to separate and creak with the

press of the sand and the rush of their travel. When she leaned to prod one of these weaker connections, the boat tipped a little, and a trickle of crystal dust streamed through the gap between bones. At last, she managed, if not to rest, at least to let her mind drift as well, slipped from the moorings of her body like their boat cast out to sea.

A tentative knock on the navigation box made her lift her head and peer out into the brilliant day. The traitor still slumped across from her, his head shielded by one arm. Between them on the box rested a frame of thin bones supporting a leathery membrane, with a second membrane over it, an infernal device of the mad Dousani, Hali thought as she glared at it. On the other hand, it was at least a novelty in this vast emptiness. She shifted her weight, groaning as her stiff muscles protested, leaning to peer at the device. The membrane on the top had a small crystal rolling slightly at its center, bearing it down into a point. Above the susurrant of sand against bone, she heard the impossible sound of a single drop of water falling among friends. Setting her eye at the level of the device, she peered inside. A few meager drops collected on the underside of the black membrane, seeping languidly down to where the crystal's weight bowed the surface. From there, a single drop plinked off into the pouch below, supported by the crossed frame of bones, where a tiny pool of water shivered with the fevered motion of the boat.

Across the device, a dark eye peered back at her, Aishynn's eye, ringed with weariness, lowered from hers beneath a fringe of lashes as he gave that tiny nod, then moved away.

Studying the thing more closely, Hali found that the pouch had a little bump stitched in and sealed off by a metal ring. When she plucked at the ring, the water trickled out upon her lips, warm, but sweeter than anything she'd ever tasted. Only a

mouthful, but enough. She pushed the ring back in place and saw the first new drop form and fall to begin the precious pool.

"What about you?" she whispered, sitting up.

The traitor gave a shrug of surrender that needed no translation and looked away at the endless Sea.

Hali sat back on her heels, wincing at the pain of sitting for so long. Finally, she pushed herself carefully to her feet, setting one foot to either side of the keel, balancing by gripping the gunnels, then standing all the way with a sigh as she stretched herself out. The wind, specked with sand, struck her full in the face, but she merely squinted and resisted, leaning a little against it, her shadow falling on Aishynn's face. For a moment, the lines of his tight-squeezed eyes and lips smoothed, his lips parting for a breath almost of ease. Her shadow, silly and slender as it was, gave him comfort. Hali wanted to laugh, but she saved her breath. Instead, she spread her wings, casting the boat into shade for an instant before the wind slapped her down.

Hali shrieked and tumbled, her head smacking the stern as the wind dragged her over, but she caught the sides, clinging, one leg and half her body still inside. The boat reared up, spilling the device, nearly surging free of the sand to overturn completely. Aishynn lunged for the opposite side, flinging himself against it in a flash of movement, catching hold in a position that mirrored her own, but with a deliberate, desperate skill, his hand and leg gripping inside. The boat smacked down, tossing Hali back inside with a crack as the upper slat broke free in her hand, twisting around Aishynn's weight and knocking free his leg. His fingers wrapped the edge, his other hand flailing for purchase, finding none.

Hali dropped flat across the navigation box, stretching out her hand, but he gave a cry, jerking away so hard he nearly lost his grip completely. Was he so infuriated by the touch of a hand that he would not take hers, even to save himself? Gritting her teeth on her frustration, Hali reached out again, this time, with the broken spar of bone.

For a moment, he stared at it, glanced at her, and beyond her to that great void reflected in his dark and mournful eyes. His fingers shifted as if he thought to let go and be swallowed by the endless Sea. Not now, she thought, not after he'd tossed himself overboard just to save her.

"Come on!" she rasped, and he looked at her again, and finally seized the outstretched bone, creeping his hands inward until he could pull himself back inside, both of them panting, his dark hair and skin glistening with tiny crystals, like a sky full of stars, their faces so close she felt his breath upon her cheek. He released the bone, running his fingers through his hair, still struggling to catch his breath. With a flicker of his gaze, Aishynn grinned, then pointed to her, spread his hands like wings, and furled them closely tight, shaking his head.

Hali giggled silently and sat back, stroking her wings into place, flinching from a bruise where she had smacked the side of the boat.

He tapped the box, staring at her earnestly, and Hali remembered the water collecting device with a bolt of fear. She scrambled to her side of the boat, gathering the pieces, moaning when she found one of the little bones broken, setting it atop the sad pile. She had ruined everything, though she only wanted to help.

Across the way, Aishynn shook his head, smoothed a hand over his face as if erasing something, then tapped the box again. He pointed to her, made that gesture as of

wings, and brought it up over his face, then fluttered his hands apart, brought them together over his heart, and gave a slight bow of his head, pointing again toward her.

"It was a silly idea," she whispered back. "I wasn't thinking."

He slapped his hand flat on the box, making the little pile, and Hali herself, jump, then cupped his hands again at his heart.

"You're welcome," she whispered, then, "I'm sorry. I should've seen how you were suffering."

With a tiny gesture of dismissal, Aishynn took up the parts of his device and set about assembling it, frowning at the broken support bone. Hali pulled a thread from the torn edge of her cloak, and carefully wound it about the broken support, then handed it back, rewarded by one of his slender smiles. Would she ever again see that brilliant grin? Who could say? What did they have to grin about, really? And yet, it had been an adventure, however brief, leaving them breathless, survivors of a shared near-disaster, one in which, impossibly, together, they lived.

## Chapter 5 Sky Full of Heroes

The little broken bone and the cloak gave her a new idea. As Aishynn retreated toward his end of the boat, she stopped him with a rap on the box, then used her hands to try to explain, with a few hoarse whispers. It took a few tries before he understood, and helped her to raise the broken slat against the front of the box, propping the hood of her cloak while the rest spread to either side over the stern, shading them if they lay to either side of the box. She found her packet of sewing things still tucked inside her belt. Using her needles and embroidery threads of red, green, blue and yellow, they stitched the cloak between the slats that formed the gunnels, creating a tent that channeled a cooling breeze through their shade and out the flapping back. Side by side, the box between them, they lay in the shade, comfortable for the first time in spite of the narrow space allotted. Aishynn set up his water device at the bow, still in the sun for reasons Hali could not quite follow in his gestured speech. He'd had no water, so his lips moved from time to time, but not even a whisper escaped. The next mouthful of water should be his.

She wished she understood the box between them, or how the broken crystal made their passage so wild and fast. At the stern of the boat, a small notch should hold a rudder, but this had been removed to send them to their death. Then she did smile. It failed. They were not dead, not close to it, between the tools he knew and the things she carried, they somehow survived—but for how long? Would the boat speed onward until

it wrecked upon some distant crag, for she knew there must be land, even in the Crystal Sea. Or would the cracked crystal fail them, stranding the craft on shimmering sands, nothing to eat, no water but the drops in that tiny pouch? No wonder Aishynn lay despairing; at least, with the shade they shared, he seemed to be sleeping.

With the dip and sway of the little boat, the smooth horizon rose and fell, varying not at all against the sweep of the clear blue sky, no clouds, no rain, the merest blot of shadow far off to the right. Hunger gnawed her belly, thirst clawed its way back up her throat, and she wiped away the grit that gathered on her face. The sky grew a little deeper, a little closer, the shadow of the tent nearly touching the water device. Hali blinked and frowned, then squinted back at the horizon: a slight darkness, a shift in the unending sand. She pushed herself up on her elbows, then crouched, staring into the distance.

"Aishynn," she whispered, then reached to tap on the box, but he was already moving, rolling to face her, noticing her posture and rising up himself, not leaving the shade of the spread cloak, staring with her into the distance. "Land?" she murmured.

The traitor nodded slowly, blinking, his gaze shifting from that distant rise to track the course of the boat itself, his frown deepening, then his hands moving to show the notch behind them, sweeping as if he held a rudder, and spreading wide in a hopeless shrug.

Could they build a rudder? By the time they did, the land might be far to the side, already out of sight. Hali's hope began to fade even as it began.

Aishynn crept from his place into the sun and took a careful step toward her side. The boat tipped a little, their course turning ever so slightly along with it, and a smile

grew upon his lips, a grin of triumph that lit his eyes, his head tossed back with a gesture of defiance toward the suns, the distant shore where the Gathering had cut them free.

Following the instructions he gestured with his careful hands, Hali wriggled toward the back and rose as well, unsteadily compared with his grace, then shifted her weight, joining her presence to his. The boat tipped more, rocking dangerously, so she eased back, Aishynn's gestures bringing her closer to center, then a little back. He at the bow, she at the stern, they danced in tiny, delicate steps. After a time, Aishynn turned away, watching the growing smudge, his hands outspread to guide their movements, poised light upon his toes to respond to any need while she echoed his stance, breath caught in her throat.

Land indeed! The low rise swelled into a craggy island, barely larger than the sandship that brought him to the Gathering, a promontory rising at one end, a series of smaller lumps resolving into strange plants that cast long and marvelous shadows in the setting sun. When the island rose straight before them, Aishynn turned again, carefully balancing, holding up his hand to stay her where she stood, and squatted at the navigational box to pry off the lid. The tent blocked her view, but she heard him rustling, something cracking, then a sudden sharp cry, and he fell back, one fist clutched to his chest, gasping.

The boat shuddered and slowed by a fraction, still bearing them speedily toward the island, the sound of their coming now reflected back from the towering crag. If she leaned now, she could swerve away from the land and let the boat drag down to stillness somewhere beyond, but how far? And how would they cross the Sea to return to their haven? No, there must be—Hali's wings ached as she thought of it, but she ignored that,

and sank down, gripping the boat once more, slowly, every so slowly, spreading her wings. The wind pummeled her, throbbing in her bruises, but she did not let go, instead spreading her wings a little more and more again as the boat slowed until she crouched there, wings outstretched, the shadow of the crag devouring the vessel, stopping it with a jolt at the base of solid stone.

Hali's wings drooped with the effort, so much more than the simple soaring she usually performed, her body sagging. Still, she rallied her numbed fingers to pluck free the ties that bound her cloak to the ship and shift it away. The navigation box, the heart of their little boat, lay open, the cracked crystal missing from its workings, replaced by a spatter of blood. Gasping, Hali stumbled over the lid and dropped beside Aishynn, stooping on the gunnel as he sheltered at the bottom of the boat.

"You're hurt," she croaked, coughing.

Inching his back up at the bow, Aishynn spread his bloodied fist, the crystal within, its fragments piercing his palm. She reached out to him, but again he shied from contact, and she withdrew, accepting his denial. Whatever was his madness, he had gotten them here, and they had resources now—whatever might be found in such a desolate place—to help them both. For the moment, she bent to the water device and rescued the pouch, still bearing its mouthful of water, holding it out to him by the slightest edge so he need not fear her touch. He took it with his uninjured hand and drank what little it contained, nodding his thanks, then rose shakily to his feet to gaze up at their destination.

Together, they wobbled from the boat onto the rim of stone that lead from the base of the crag around to the flatter side of the island. The crystal sand sucked at Hali's

feet so that she gripped the pitted stone with her fingers and crept along before him, trying to ignore the little sounds of pain he tried to stifle.

Sunlight broke over them once more when they stumbled onto the leveling ground to find the bounds of this new prison. A few dozen paces encompassed the entire island, aside from the promontory at the far end, looming over a slope of queer, knobby plants that, in shape, resembled Podling roots more than anything else, but were formed of a delicate lattice of crystal, glittering in the sun, sparkling and sending dancing lights all around them, with tiny soft leaves interrupting the structure like vines growing up a crystal tree. Hali hesitated to touch them—they looked sharp, serene and beautiful.

Aishynn's face lit when he saw them and he pounced on the first one, struggling to pull it up one-handed. That he would destroy such beauty dismayed her utterly, and she pulled back from him while he shattered the fragile thing, scowled, glaring at the stump where it protruded from the ground, and moved on to another. What new madness was this? But he glanced at her, and imitated her earlier cupping gesture, then waved his hand at the crystal stalks as if they had anything to do with drinking. His shoulders slumped, and he turned away, taking hold of the new stalk lower down, jiggling and jerking at it, digging his hands into the dirt.

Confused, but willing to follow his example, Hali joined the effort, to no avail, finally returning to the boat to reclaim the broken slat of bone, using it to pry at the base of the plant. They fell back together as it finally gave up its perch with a ripping sound, a cracking of tiny roots, and a shattering of crystal all around them. The remaining roots writhed in the air, seeking a place to dig in again, and finally quivered to stillness,

surrounding a thick bole which had broken in the struggle to reveal a dense, white center dripping with moisture.

Between them, Hali and Aishynn broke it again, each gripping a fat chunk and eating until the juice ran down their faces and fingers, wetting their teeth, a thick, sweet liquid filling the crisp flesh of the root.

"Delicious!" Hali announced, pleased that her voice no longer cracked, then slurped the juice from her fingers as well.

Aishynn nodded, wiping his chin with the back of his injured hand. When he set down his meal, he tore a bit of cloth from his tunic and clumsily bound up the cut palm.

"I wish you'd let me help you," Hali said.

"Don't touch me," he murmured, and she frowned, sitting up.

"You spoke. You haven't spoken all day."

He looked startled, then glanced up, his skin glossy, his finger tracing the raised scar at his cheek. Both suns had fled the sky, leaving only that glow sure to fade soon. Already, stars appeared in the darkest patches of the growing night. Aishynn's eyes grew huge and round, and he dropped the bandage, scrambling up the crag instead in a sudden, wild flurry of motion.

Shaking her head, Hali followed more carefully and came to stand beside him, for he flung himself down upon his back, staring upward. "No time, no time," he muttered. "Holy stars and symbols, where and how? How far? How long? Remember! Remember it!" He beat his forehead with his clenched fists, blood oozing from his palm, froze, and gave a shout that sent her stumbling back.

These last few hours, when they struggled together in the boat, when she felt she almost understood him, in spite of his silence, Hali nearly forgot he was a madman, a traitor and a drinker of souls. When he assaulted the beautiful plants, she recalled it briefly, only to then discover the reason for his strange behavior. But this raving and prancing, ignoring his own injury surely had no other meaning than madness. Now, she wished for a weapon to hold him off, and thought of climbing back in the boat in case his madness grew violent as it had the night before and he tried to attack her as he had attacked the Spriton matriarch. Anyone who would attack a Spriton was mad indeed. She slithered down the slope to fetch the shaft of bone they used as a pry-rod, and, when he showed no sign of pursuit or even of noticing her absence, she returned cautiously, unsure what she would find.

Her alarm grew as he scrambled about the stone, alternately staring at the sky, then jabbing the rock with his cut fingers. He muttered about time and stars and places and darkness and finally, as the suns vanished, knelt on the crag, howling, his palms flat on the stone as he wailed his misery to the stars.

Yet none of this was aimed at her. He barely glanced at her in his crazy crawling, except to give a little cry or garbled apology. His trousers tore across his knees, both palms now bleeding, his hair dangling around him where he huddled and sobbed.

"Aishynn," she said, softly, still from a distance.

He didn't turn, but seemed to shake harder.

"What's wrong?"

"It's them!" His hand shot upward, jabbing a finger toward the sky. "It's them—it's that—I used to know them—they used to be my life, my truth, my trail through the

sky, and now, they're nothing! It's like they've gone and the sky is nothing but blackness. Like the skeksis tore down the very stars and left me nothing." He collapsed again, arms cradled against him, a compact image of loss.

Hali took all of this in, trying to make sense of it. The skeksis tearing down the stars. They might, if they could reach them, but the stars were still there. She tipped back her head. In fact, this crag upon the Crystal Sea saw more stars than she had ever known. In her forest home, stars came in glimpses over the village fires, or in little patches where they sowed their crops, never in great, soaring fields like the blossoms of spring, a thousand thousand of them, bright and glittering, soft and barely seen, groups and clumps and lines embroidering the sky. Her neck ached already, and she tread gently across the stone, avoiding the drops of his blood, to find a place where she could sit, not far from him, but neither did she come too near his private grief.

"The stars are here, Aishynn, all around us, full of heroes and stories of old. Look!" She pointed, leaning back on her elbow, cradling her weapon at first, then simply lowering it to the ground. "There's Jarra-Jen, the great gelfling hero. You must know his story, how he travelled to confront the tyrant, and received gifts from those he helped along the way? When he used those gifts to win the battle, he claimed the Horn of Thunder, the horn that calls down thunder to terrify your enemies, and hid it away so it could never again be used for violence." As she spoke, Aishynn uncurled himself, letting his eyes be drawn upward. "There, those seven stars mark his shoulders and his arm, one star for each of the gelfling clans. If you follow his hand, see? Those stars make the Horn. Some say, he hid it in the sky. I wish it were here, on Thra, so we could use it to defeat the skeksis forever."

She let her hand fall to her chest, settling her back upon the stone. Aishynn lay down as well, but she caught the gleam of tears at the corner of his eye, as if the very stars hurt him to see.

"Jarra-Jen," he echoed. "I can't see him. You say the sky is full of heroes, and I can't see even one."

His mania had passed, his voice weary and sad, moving her more to pity than to fear. "But you came up here to see the stars, didn't you?"

For a long time, he barely breathed, and she didn't want to risk another bout of madness by saying the wrong thing. Below, in the clusters of strange plants, an insect trilled, joined by another, until a chorus of tiny creatures chattered and sang beneath the cooling night. With a cheep! and a snap and a slither, some other small thing found its dinner, briefly silencing the chorus, but the night creatures were not afraid for long, and the chorus began all over.

"I used to know the stars. When night falls, and I look up, it feels as if my clan are staring back at me, but I can't see their faces. I should know them, know them all, as well as any child knows its mother, yet I feel only their loss. My loss, I should say. I'm lost in the world, and I can't ever find my way home."

Her hand crept toward him over the stone, then stopped, clenched into a helpless fist. "I'm sorry," she said.

"He said I would see them more clearly, more brightly than ever. He never told me I would forget their names."

"Who, Aishynn?" Hali breathed, afraid of the answer, knowing it already, as she had known her own skeksis, the one she trusted, the one who might have betrayed them all.

"SkekTek, the scientist. He knows so much—you can't imagine what he knows, what he can do. He once told me he had made Aughra's orrery, did you know that? I only wanted to learn from him, to take his knowledge back to the clan. Better ships, faster ones, lighter on the sand—every wonder he could teach me! Instead—" he broke off, and turned his face away.

"He lied," she whispered.

"And I believed him."

"Have you told your people this?"

"I'm not always like this. The madness comes at dawn and dusk, and I can't. . . no one listens, not since the first night. In my madness, I stole the ship, I think I meant to sail by the stars, the way I always did, but I couldn't, I couldn't do anything, so instead I broke its heart. That's how I knew what to do, to stop us." His hand gestured toward the foot of the crag where he broke their own little boat. "They're not just ships, Hali, they are villages, where we live. It would be like setting fire to your forest, to break a sandship. I drove it straight onto the rocks. They tried to stop me, and I hurt people, my own people. Until they received the matriarch's command, they kept me apart from themselves, where they couldn't hear my voice. I offend them. They--We—" he broke off in a sigh.

"The matriarch said you were. . .loud," she said, recalling the air of disgust with which Shannai used the word, as if it were the gravest insult, and, to a people who rarely spoke at all, it could well be.

"Loud," Aishynn echoed, with a shudder.

"They should listen to you," Hali insisted. "They need to hear what happened to you, Aishynn, I'm sure you didn't mean to be a traitor, you're just—"

"What am I? I did drink it, Hali. I drank what he offered me. I wanted his knowledge, can you understand that? Could they? I broke that ship, ruined it, and hurt all those who would have stopped me, those who might have helped me once, and something's gone wrong in my skull! The stars were my life, and now they are my madness." He gripped his head, digging in his fingers. "Even I don't know what's wrong with me. They're right to curse me."

"To curse you, yes, but not to kill you."

"What about you? You lead that skeksis to the Gathering—do you deserve to die?"

Hali stared up at the forest of stars, uncertain how to answer, uncertain how even to speak. By day, he kept his silence, by night he spewed nonsense, then found his voice, only to describe his madness in awful detail. What was he? What was either of them? Traitors both, or merely wrong, merely lost and searching, trying to find some guidance and not knowing whom to trust. This traitor saved her life today, and nearly lost his own for fear of touching her with his madness. What did it matter, trapped as they were in the Crystal Sea? What if they could return home—could they ever be redeemed, or were

their failings not just mistakes to be mended, but fatal flaws, cracks in their very hearts which sent them blindly off beyond all known horizon?

Not knowing what else to do, Hali found her flute and played, a simply, delicate tune. Music soothed her, as it had soothed them both on the boat, and cleared—

"Don't!" Aishynn sprang toward her, then stopped short as she scrambled to her feet.

"I thought you liked it," she replied, shaken by his change, the speed of his lunge.

He frowned, rubbing his forehead. "There's a reason for silence, I know there is."

Hali turned away, shivering in the night, and saw that Aishynn was suddenly, terribly right about one thing at least: the stars had gone, a great patch of them blotted out by darkness. She screamed as the darkness plunged straight toward her, a broad, fleshy lump smacking her into the sky, then the darkness snapped her up in terrible claws.

## Chapter 6    A Short, Sharp Flight

Hali rushed up into the air, head and legs dangling, kicking, slapping, flapping her own wings. The thing struggled to lift her, wobbling, but she rose nonetheless, slender, sharp-clawed fingers wrapping her chest, her hair dangling down. Finding her flute, she jabbed at the legs, scraping and banging, prying at the toes and the thing let go with one foot, her body twisting in its grip, the flute slipping her from her grasp.

Hali stretched after it, her hand a pale star, too late, too weak. She beat her wings harder, crying out at the pain that streaked across her shoulders. With a high-pitched whistle, the beast arched and plunged again, striking her hard into the stone, her head hitting first, her wings slapping down. Something snapped at her back and pain shot through her.

For a moment, her vision doubled, barely making out the shape of huge wings, so thin the starlight shone through, revealing the webbing of veins, the long, thin bones she recognized as the masts of sandships. A broad face with a crumpled muzzle and sharp fangs loomed over her, screeching.

Clenching her tighter, the thing swept its wings to launch once more into the sky.

A pale streak cut her vision, slashing for the creature's wing, tearing downward.

The high-pitched cry rose even sharper, hurting her ears, and another cry of pain joined her own, but Aishynn staggered near, still clutching the broken slat of bone. He struck out again.

Twisting and flapping, the creature plunged its head toward Aishynn.

He stood beneath the towering darkness, body tensed, feet spread as if he balanced once more on their little boat. Had the madness come again, to leave him so still, frozen beneath this terrible foe? But he looked fierce, not fearful. Run, she wanted to shout to him, but she had not the breath to cry her warning, her chest squeezing, a sharp pain jabbing her at every gasp.

Just as it seemed the gaping jaws must snap down over Aishynn's proud head, he lifted his bone spear, pivoted to the side and thrust toward the creature's face.

Its shriek rose to a horrible keening. Hot liquid splashed her face, then she was moving, dragged over stone, her battered wings trapped beneath her, the suffocating claws not releasing their hold. Her hands grappled with the claws, her fingers scraped over the stone, dug into pits only to be torn free. With a whoosh of air, the creature fell backward from the crag. Hali's hands spread into the sky.

A dark hand reached from the stars and caught her wrist. She clamped it with both of her own, kicking her feet and twisting as the creature's claws finally peeled free and it scrapped and smashed down the rock, just as she would have done, her own wings destroyed, her body crumpled into the Crystal Sea, but for the hand that caught her.

Aishynn pulled her back from the darkness into the sky, onto the surface of the bloodied stone, into his arms, both of their hearts pounding, his hand caught in her grip as

her arms trembled, and she brought his strong, dark fist close against her chest as she fought for breath, her wings shuddering against him, sobbing.

The stars wheeled in her vision, and she shook her head, trying to clear her sight, to shake away the throbbing of her skull, but the stars soared all around her, and she felt herself among them—not only seeing them as distant points of light, but feeling the touch of fire as she soared, shapes and patterns she had never known before rising up and forming in the dark around her—the Traitor's Crown, Aughra's Staff, the Podlings, the Silver Ship of Sifa legend, alongside the Spritons' Sword and Maiden. Jarra-Jen's outstretched hand pointed toward the Horn of Thunder, sharp and bright in her vision. It took her breath away, yet she suddenly breathed more deeply, the entire sky there at her command, and she, a dancing spirit, guided, star to star and light to light, but not alone--never alone again.

Dreamfasting. These were not her stars she was seeing, but his, the stars that Aishynn knew and loved so well, the stars he searched and cursed and needed, laid out as before her in dazzling array.

*Hali—what a beautiful name! Wait--you see them, you see the stars.* Even in her mind, his voice rang with joy, with sorrow.

*I see them! By all the matriarchs and Aughra, too, Aishynn, is this what you see when you search the sky?*

*No! no—not since—no more.* His arm tremored and he tore free of her grip. The stars vanished around her, like the thousand brilliant gleams of a callope's eyes, snapped shut between its shells.

Aishynn released her, slipping her from his embrace, retreating somewhere into the darkness, his breath in sharp gasps, almost as painful as her own.

Hali lay there, shivering, her hand never before so cold and empty as now, now that he had stolen back his own, her fingers trembling, streaked with blood, his or hers, or who could tell? They were joined, for that one fleeting instant, when they flew through his glorious world of stars. Dreamfasted, for a moment, and forever. Dreamfasted with a madman.

The world dropped away from her, leaving her on stone, battered and bleeding, barely breathing, the one person in all the world who should have stayed by her fleeing to his madness.

She wanted to scream and shout and rave. Dreamfasted with a madman—not the Vapra beauty she used to imagine, not even a Woodlander like Rian, strong and steady, no, but with this stranger, silent by day, and by night unable to stop himself talking, who loved the stars and could not understand them, who broke a ship and hurt his own clansmen, who studied with the skeksis and drank a soul. Cruel, wicked, unfair—or simple justice for someone like her, to be trapped into trusting a man who could not trust himself.

Aishynn stood a few feet distant, his hand trembling, too, he staring as if he no longer recognized it. He glanced back at her, an edge of white at his eyes, then turned and hurried away.

## Chapter 7    The Stars in Blood

Hali stirred a little when the cloak settled over her, shivered, and drew her empty hands back to her, beneath the covering he spread, breathing on her fingers to warm them. She still shivered, and another covering joined the first, the weight making her wings and chest pulse with pain. Her head throbbed against the stone, then a gentle hand shifted it, a warm, bare arm sliding beneath to pillow her bruised skull, careful breathing, Aishynn's still form before her, sharing his warmth, and she could finally stop shivering. Fitfully, she dozed, wincing whenever she tried to shift her position, waking to find his dark gaze on her, the flutter of careful fingers smoothing back her hair, adjusting her coverings. Dawn's light spread pink at the edge of her vision at last, and she could hear him muttering, even make out the tirade of abuses--stupid, foolish, skeksis-stained, blind, deadly, dangerous, loud—all aimed at himself. For her: dying, dead, no! don't die, rest, those wings, so sorry, they come to sound, help from the healers, lost.

When the suns had risen high enough to shed their own warmth, Hali forced her eyes to stay open, in spite of her exhaustion. She heard Aishynn down the slope, grunting with effort, otherwise silent, accompanied by the scrape of the sandy soil, the cracking of roots. In a while, he knelt before her, holding a mound of the white-fleshed, juicy tubers they had eaten the previous day, offering her one, again stroking back the hair from her face so she could eat and suck down the sweet liquid. He lifted one layer from her covers, his own tunic, and folded it to place beneath her head. Attempting a

smile, a crooked, worried smile, Aishynn made a series of gestures. *I need to check your injuries. I'm sorry—it's bound to hurt. Stupid, it's not as if you can hear me.*

He pushed away, head bowed, but she snaked a hand toward him. "Aishynn."  
Her voice came out in a hiss, her chest aching. "I hear you."

Sitting back on his heels, Aishynn spoke again. *You hear me? You understand what I'm saying.*

"Dreamfasting," she whispered, and he lurched up as if she had struck him.

Fists clenched, he stood swaying, then relaxed his hands, forcing his fingers apart, and said, *I'm sorry.*

"Tiel said, that someone dreamfasted, with Dousani, could understand. Will you, talk to me now?"

With an apologetic tip of his head, he answered, *Speech does not come naturally to the Dousani. We have to try so hard to guard our water, even the water in our mouths. It's hard to go against all those years of silence.*

"You speak, at night."

*Loud*, he gestured back to her, frowning. *I can't remember the night.*

Before she could answer, he moved around behind her, peeling back the cloak, and his hands moved lightly along her wings. A blinding agony struck through her and she gave a gasping cry, a hand flying to her chest as the pain rebounded there beneath her ribs. Broken. Her wings were broken. Not that she could fly, her wings were not big enough to carry her upward, not like bats or flyters or the horrible thing that attacked her last night, but to glide from a height, to simply spring into the air and soar—she remembered soaring through the stars last night, clasping Aishynn's hand and flying his

dream. For that to be the last time she flew—the thought was unbearable. Tears streamed down her face, her sobs ragged, tight and painful.

Aishynn continued his careful assessment, fingers probing along her sides, running gently over her skull. Her ribs might collapse and her skull fracture like that broken crystal—what did it matter with her wings destroyed?

Returning to the patch of ground in her narrowed vision, Aishynn sat a moment, face averted, hands still in his lap, before he spoke. *There are people among the Dousani who might heal you, if I can take you there. Our boat can be fixed, I can do that, but I don't know. . . I'm sorry. I'll try.*

She gave a little nod, an acknowledgement of his effort. As if dismissed, he pushed off from the stone and walked away. Sounds of dragging, hacking, breaking intruded on her rest all the long morning. At some point, before the suns were high, Aishynn took up her cloak and the broken slat to build her a little tent, and she lay in the shade, half-afraid to breathe, chewing on bits of root, her eyes tracing the patterns of blood across the stone. Heal her, what was left of her. How long would it take to get there? And they, already lost in the Crystal Sea, without the stars to steer by. She thought of the Horn of Thunder and the great hero Jarra-Jen who had hidden it. For a moment, last night, she imagined being able to find it and return to their people, triumphant and forgiven. What were legends but the lies one tells to children, to encourage them to lie to themselves about what they might do and who they might be?

She felt a little stronger in the afternoon, and reached out to trace the bloody markings. Some were Aishynn's fingerprints as he had scrambled on the stone, more

distant, long streaks of blood marked the battle with the creature, her own blood and its dying mingled on the edge.

Aishynn worked all day, moving from the slope at her back, around the edge of the crag, the sound of him the only thing of interest around her. He brought her more tubers and encouraged her to eat, but said little else. Toward dusk, he started to mutter, appearing again before her, jaw clamped tight, to place something on the ground at her side, turn, and flee, down to rant among the stalks until dusk turned to night.

She let the thing lie there, flicking a glance over it, and nothing more. Her flute, cracked and streaked with blood like everything else about her. The flute which, it seemed, called the creature that attacked her and broke her wings, setting her twin loves of music and flight forever at odds within her.

Beyond the opening of the tent, stars emerged from the dusk. Again, she remembered soaring among them. There was Jarra-Jen and his Horn, there the blankness of Raunip's Orb. . . but she couldn't remember all of the names, although the patterns looked familiar now. Hali frowned. Cautiously, she pushed herself up on her elbow, wincing at the pain, blinking away the tears unbidden. Familiar patterns, specks of light in the sky, specks of blood on the ground. Her eyes flared wide. "Aishynn!" she croaked, smothering her gulps for breath as they rippled in pain through her chest, down to the tips of her ruined wings. She flopped back onto her side, clinging to the bone that held up her tent, waving it in the hopes that he would see.

Aishynn came at a run to drop before her. "What is it? Hali, are you alright?"

His voice—praise the matriarchs!—aloud, kind and clear, and blessedly sane. "The stars (gasp) you made them (gasp) yesterday." She dropped her head, panting shallow breaths through the pain.

"You're hurt—you need to be still, Hali." He cradled her shoulder, her head shifting to rest against him, as he shifted the pillow back beneath her head. "I'm working on the boat—it's nearly done, then we can. . ." Once more any hope fled his voice. "Hali. . .I don't know where to go. Even if I did. . .I don't know how to get there."

"Yes," she gasped, "you do." She fumbled for one of the broken roots that lay nearby, and he helped her take it, swallowing a few more mouthfuls. "Your blood, your hand, hurt. You drew them, the stars." She reached out, pointing, her hand tracing the shapes she had recognized in the pattern of blood upon the stone. She couldn't see them now, the starlight was too weak for that, but Aishynn followed her movement, tipped his head, then crept over, tracing patterns with his fingertips as if the markings shown plain as day. For a moment, he grew animated, almost vibrating with excitement, but it faded as he returned to the tent.

"They don't make any sense to me, even like that."

At night, he could see them, but could not understand them, and by day, he would forget what he saw. For a moment, the pain echoed her own. "Not now. By day. I'll show you. Help you. Remember." She spent several long moments in breathing, teeth clenched against the pain.

His hand hovered near her, as if to touch, then he withdrew, sitting opposite, hands clasped in his lap.

Mastering herself, biting back the hurt, Hali said, "You didn't hide, from the monster, Aishynn, please, don't hide, from me."

"What if I hurt you?" he whispered. "What if I kill you? What if I break your heart?"

Hali gazed back at him, remembering the shadow, the great winged beast that snatched her from her rest, the shadow that cut the sky and blotted out the stars, until Aishynn stood before it, fearless, and struck it from the sky. Even then, it would have dragged her over with its own dying strength had he not broken his own taboo in seizing her hand. She bewailed fate for trapping her with him—but they had been trapped already, all day long, and it had taken them both to survive. Together, they shielded each other from the heat, they balanced the boat to find a harbor, they overcame the death they were condemned to. Together, they ate and drank, and even laughed. They lived for each other, each risking all for the other, to give him shade, to keep her safe, to bring each other—for even a moment—comfort, safety, courage, peace. They shared so much already, before they ever joined their hands.

Half-mad herself with this knowledge, she whispered. "You already have." She crept her fingers out toward him across the rock. "We're Dreamfasted, Aishynn, even if, you never, again, touch my hand, it's true—it will always, be true."

"I'm sorry this had to happen to you. I tried to avoid it."

At first, she thought he was referring to the attack, to her injuries, then she realized with a sickness at the pit of her stomach that he meant the dreamfasting, the union between them that enabled her to understand him, that contact he had tried so hard to prevent. Gelflings learned dreamfasting from their elders, their parents showing them,

sharing their memories of times long past. At great moments, members of the clan came together in a ring to dreamfast and strengthen the clan, but it was between a man and a woman that the deepest dreaming came, a sharing of the past, yes, but of the present, of the future as well, if they wished it so. It could not be imposed upon another, but must be freely given, yearned for, sought for, asked, and answered.

Since she was a girl, Hali dreamed of that moment of sharing, of total openness with another, but Aishynn was right, this shouldn't have happened between them. She hadn't wanted it; clearly, Aishynn was determined it shouldn't grow any deeper. Could a dreamfast be broken, unmade? She didn't know. She needed him then, he answered her need, nothing more. For now, it would be useful to understand the language of his hands and know, even a little, of the madness in his mind and the hunger in his heart. When they could return to their clans, apart from each other, the bond would surely fade and leave her free to choose another.

"I'll cover you," he said, "and keep watch, in case there's another chaiad." He rose, taking down the slat that held her tent, draping the cloak around her shoulders, moving away into the night.

He must be freezing, Hali thought, and wondered if he had any way to make a fire, then the exhaustion overwhelmed her and she slept.

The dawn madness woke her as before, Aishynn's voice growing louder as he worked over the stalks and carried her a fresh pile of tubers, dodging her gaze, sloughing off her sympathy.

A second day passed as the first, but this time, along with the tubers, Aishynn brought her some dried strips of flesh to chew on, stringy and metallic in flavor, but more

filling for her growling stomach. *The boat will be done today*, he told her. *I've added as many tavo roots and as much meat as I think we can carry, along with the two of us, but I still. . .* a gesture toward the sky that carried no words, but a wealth of meaning.

Hali nodded. "At dusk, you'll know, for a little while. Mark the stars, on my cloak. Tell me the path, as much as you can." She stopped, shutting her eyes, until the pain ebbed again. "Sail by night?" she whispered at last, peeling her eyes open again to watch for his reply.

Sadly, he shook his head. *At night*—a helpless gesture as of the world coming to pieces.

"Then I must know, which direction from the suns."

As twilight came on that night, Hali guided his madness. The blood he used was not his own—he carried it up from the foot of the crag in a scrap of leather that might once have been the ear of the bat-creature, the *chaiad*, he had called it. During that strange conjunction between his day and his night, Hali told him again what he must do, and his eyes lit, grasping their plan, eagerly marking the stars, mumbling the whole time as she struggled to recall what he told her, which stars they followed, which direction they pointed, the shape of the huge stone that was the Dousani harbor, a secret from all save the clan, and now her. As the madness faded into the calm, talkative time of the night, Aishynn stared at the cloak and the blood on his hands, and went away to clean himself, returning some time later, his skin sparkling with sand and tiny crystals, but the smell of blood lingered beneath the sweet juices of the plants they shared for supper.

When the second sun rose in the morning, Aishynn reverently carried down the pattern of stars, and returned to carry her. In preparation for the journey, he bound thin

slats of bone along her broken wings, cradling her gently to his chest as he took the slope, her hands wrapped about his neck, his heart strong and steady, his eyes keen as he laid her in the boat. It now carried a rudder, a long bone still dark from the body of the creature, and—he darted a glance to her before revealing this—a sail. *A crystal is better, more certain, faster for a boat of this size, but we have no more crystal, and there are none on this island large enough to drive it.*

"Your other, ships, have sails," she managed, weak even from being carried.

*For the great sandships, we use both, the crystal driving us even if the wind is poor, and keeping us steady, the wind adding strength to the crystal's movement, for the bulk of the ship itself. But those sails are white, of crystalweave. Our sail is not like that.*

He ducked his head with a smile that faded almost as she noticed it, and she was sorry to see it go. He settled in the stern, rudder at his side, the long, folded shape of the sail beside him, then took up a slender shaft of bone and pushed the sail aloft. Thin and veined, black against the sun, the wing of the chaiad spread once more overhead.

Aishynn secured it to the navigation box using a new hole he'd made there. The lower edge of the wing, bounded by one of those long bones, he held with a rope of sinew. Immediately, the wind pushed at the wing and the boat lurched, then wallowed forward.

It took a long time for Aishynn to work out how to control the craft, the wing casting a ragged shadow over them which raced along the shimmering sand. Lulled by the rush of sand against the hull once more and warmed by the sun, Hali slept, rocking beneath the dark wing's shade.

When the sun shifted far enough that Aishynn could not be sure of the way and Hali was too weary to interpret the patterns or remember what she had coaxed from his madness, they rested beneath the shade of their strange sail. He couldn't speak much while he handled the rudder and drew the sail as needed to keep their course. Weary, he ate and drank as they rested, while she looked at the dark marks upon her cloak, tracing again the shape of the Horn.

"Wish we could, find this."

*The Horn of Thunder? We're following it, at least part way.*

"For real. To bring it home. Against the skeksis." She sighed a long, aching breath. "Just a story."

Aishynn shook his head. *It is real. The stars point the way to the hiding place, or so our matriarchs have always said.*

Real. The Horn of Thunder that could compel the skeksis to leave them alone, never again to claim friendship and commit treachery, to steal a soul, to break a mind as they had broken Aishynn. The dream no longer seemed so worthy now, with her broken wings bound to stillness, her broken chest unable to breathe, much less to sound her instrument.

Aishynn rose, distracted, to squint into the distance. He pointed. *It's there! I can see the harbor. Who needs the sky?* and he gave a peal of laughter, bright and full of victory, and Hali lay back, wishing she could share in his delight.

Real. . .Hali closed her eyes and dreamed of the stars.

## Chapter 8 Shipbreaker

The voice that woke her belonged to a stranger and stranger's hands drew her from the boat. "You are welcome here," the Dousani said, and it seemed bizarre to her now, after days of seeing Aishynn's face, the naked expressions of despair and delight that crossed it, to see only the eyes of the man who bent over her peering from a long drapery of cloth. Three of them carried her carefully up a broad stair, into a structure carved of stone and roofed with more cloth, a light and fluttering ceiling that diffused the light of the sun. She caught glimpses of tools and looms, of long bones stacked in a corner, waiting for use. Other Dousani looked up from their work, some of them wearing only head wrappings and tunics to free up their arms for shipbuilding.

A second drapery divided the room, and here they set her down upon a table padded over with pillows. Hali sighed into them, letting the Dousani healers fuss about her, drinking what they offered, feeling the heat of the healing draught pouring down her throat, sinking in a deep sleep, for the first time in days, without pain, without stars.

She woke, startled at the silence. No soft muttering voice, no quiet presence. Was it day or night? If night, then he'd be talking, if day, he would be working—he seemed rarely to be still. "Aishynn?" she called, her chest tight now with bandages, but no longer in pain.

"There is none here of that name," a woman's voice answered.

Hali jerked and started to push herself up, but the woman laid a hand upon her shoulders.

"Stay, girl. You are not ready to rise. I am an interpreter, one who lives between, to speak with others." She wore a head wrapping, but only over her forehead and draping down her back, leaving her face revealed, dark and wrinkled with age. "They have bound your chest and the ribs are already healing. Your wings, ah." She shook her head a little. "They were not good, but we have done what might be. We have used our skill of sails and spars to make repairs." A sad smile lifted the wrinkles. "I do not know if they will bear your weight. You should not try for many passings of both suns."

"Where's Aishynn? The one who brought me here?"

The old woman's smile fled. "There was a traitor brought you here. His story is strange. He tells us you came into the boat by mistake, that you should have gotten out, but for the broken crystal. He hopes he has not made you a traitor with him."

"No," said Hali, faintly, not sure what she was protesting. He brought her to be healed, knowing they would recognize him for a traitor, knowing they would put him out again—and lied to them to win for her, at least, their trust.

"You are our guest. Please, be comfortable and be healed." Again, she smiled, but it seemed false, like just another silken cloth to conceal what she was really thinking.

"Thank you," Hali murmured, then allowed the woman to feed her soup and more of the healing draught. She did not swallow this, however, but held it in her mouth and let it dribble away into the pillow. She could endure the pain better than she could endure not knowing what had become of Aishynn. Hali let her eyes slide shut and made her breathing level low and slow.

At the sound of fabric rustling, Hali opened her eyes again, just a little, letting the screen of her lashes remain. The old woman withdrew a little way, sitting on a cushion and taking up a braid of ropes, humming softly to herself as she worked. If she stayed the whole time, Hali would never get the chance to look around.

After a moment, though, another Dousani entered, and the woman put down her work, freeing her hands to talk. *How is she?* asked the newcomer.

*Recovering well, harbormaster. She is young and vital. She may even use her wings again.*

The harbormaster chuckled. *Although she may be embarrassed to spread them, especially when there are boys about. Do you know any more of what happened?*

*She did ask about the traitor, and well she may be grateful for his bringing her. I do not think she is a part of his wickedness.*

*He broke this boat as well, did you see? And gave it a black sail.*

The woman's next gestures took a careful pace, her face turned skyward. *As the ancients did.*

*This is a matter of danger, not of reverence. He's wily, resourceful. I don't know that casting him off will be enough.*

Pulling back from him, her wings unsettled at her back, the old woman replied, *You're not suggesting that we would just—leave him there? It's been two days already!*

*I would not leave him before hearing from the matriarch, certainly, but it must be considered. He's a creature of the skeksis, Imara, he cannot be trusted, and he has our knowledge, he knows the stars, the courses and the ways of the Crystal Sea—if the skeksis have that knowledge they will use it against us. And what if he knows the Way of the*

*Horn? We've guarded that knowledge almost since the first Great Conjunction. skeksis wielding the Horn? He made a sharp gesture to ward off evil.*

*And we can't simply ask him, how can we trust what he says?*

*The man nodded, hesitated, and made a little movement of apology. We might force a fasting.*

*Force it? There's another thing we've not spoken of since ancient times! She recoiled, gripping her hands together.*

*If we did it, we would not have to wait for the matriarch, not if what we learn justifies what we must do. But we would need someone skilled, someone. . .like you.*

*It would have to be at one of his raging times, at dawn or dusk, when his defenses are low, even then, I wouldn't attempt it without restraints, and perhaps the fumes of Estor, something to submerge his will. She broke off, grimacing. I can't imagine we're even discussing this, subjecting one of our own to a forced fasting.*

*He's not one of us, Imara, not since he broke the Sandship Rollanor. We did try to help him, we tried to bring him back to the castle, to seek the aid of the skeksis scientist.*

*Not so mad, to resist going there, now that we know more of their evil.*

*He broke the ship—he drove it onto the rocks, Imara! Our people were hurt, left homeless, one of our greatest ships destroyed beyond repair, then he attacked those of us trying to save it. I was there, have you forgotten? The man slipped back his cloak to reveal a long scar down his forearm. I don't like it either—I was one of those who supported his going to the castle in the first place. He might have been the greatest navigator for generations. Now look at him. Or worse—listen to him!*

Both of them shuddered, and Hali's jaw tightened, anger and desperation stiffening her spine. At least he was still here, somewhere, and their talk confirmed what he told her about the Horn. If anything skekTek had done to Aishynn allowed him access to Dousani knowledge, then it seemed the more urgent to her that someone needed to find the Horn, lest the skeksis get there first. On the other hand, the sight of the harbormaster's injury and his horror at the ruin of the sandship suggested the significance of what Aishynn had done to them. No wonder they couldn't listen—but to bind him, foul his senses with smoke and force him to Dreamfast, at the height of his madness when he would be most vulnerable—no! Twice now, both by day and by night, Aishynn's quick mind and strong heart had saved her life, the very least she could do would be to free him from the punishments of his own people.

*Well, there are ships to mend. Think on this, and let us talk again at supper. We might then take action.*

She made a smooth gesture that cleared the air before her and settled her hand to a fist. *If you think it wise, harbormaster, then I agree. Do you wish my help to consult the rest of the navigators?*

The man hesitated, then answered slowly, *I have already spoken with them—yesterday. I doubted most that you would be convinced, and so—*

*You saved me for last. She unfurled her wings a little. I shall take it for a compliment to my stout mind, old friend.*

*Tonight, then, after supper. And thank you.*

He bowed slightly, and retreated from the room.

Yesterday? No wonder Hali already felt so much better. If he had consulted with others yesterday, then she had been sleeping for two nights and the day between at least, while Aishynn lay trapped in whatever prison they devised. If only she had her flute! Sitting in the slanting sunlight—the suns already sinking toward dusk—the old woman was already nodding. With her flute, Hali might have played her softly to sleep.

Still. . .she wet her lips and whistled, very softly, matching the sound of the wind at the curtains. The old woman gave no sign that she heard, plaiting her rope a little longer, shifting her back to ease her spine, with a little wince of discomfort.

Hali changed her tone, moving low. The bandages prevented her from breathing too deeply, but they reminded her to keep it soft and simple, a lullaby she might have played for babies back in the woodland.

The old woman's eyelids fluttered. She rubbed at her eyes, then set down her rope with a sigh, leaning her head against the wall.

Whistling softly, maintaining the lullaby, Hali watched from behind her lashes. The old woman glanced over at her, blinking broadly, yawning, then turned away, apparently satisfied. She sagged onto her side, her wings furled behind her, delicate folds of grey, dusted with the sheen of crystal common to everything in the Sea. Her breathing lengthened, her hands going still, and Hali opened her own eyes, still whistling, sitting up carefully and sliding her legs from beneath the light blankets. Her body ached, but the pains were distant and dull, a tune barely heard across the forest. They had removed her leggings, leaving her a long tunic, and dressed her in a long garment of delicate material, the same fine stuff they always wore. Her skin felt clean for the first time in days, and

gratitude warred with the anger she carried toward the Dousani who nursed her to health even as they prepared to punish her rescuer.

Strengthening her resolve, Hali tried her feet and found they would hold her. She vaguely recalled being fed bowls of that thick broth along with spoonfuls of the healing draught that made her sleep as it mended her bones. From beyond the curtain came the sounds of shipwrights, the scrape and pound of building. In the other direction, another curtain hung over a smaller, brighter space where she heard a trickle of water, but no sounds of movement. It seemed eerie, to know there were workmen outside, but to hear no voices. Before she could rise, Hali had to find the edges of her voluminous garment, tugging and wrapping until she could free her arms and legs.

Sure now that the old woman slept, Hali backed slowly away and slipped behind the smaller curtain, finding herself in an open space carved from the stone, where a pool of water welled up in the center.

The sound, the sight, the moist air and flavor on her lips made Hali, if anything, more thirsty than she had been on that first day in the Sea, and she dropped to her knees, drinking eagerly of the pure water. She caught a reflection of dark movement behind her and twitched to look, but found no one. More slowly, she looked back at the water, its surface going still after her drink. A narrow, pale face stared back at her, thinner than before, her eyes blue and shining—that, at least, hadn't changed, her hair a smooth brown, streaked with gold, like heartwood, and, over her shoulders, a glimpse of her wings. Hali's heart fell. Her wings.

She unfurled them just a little, spreading the span to either side to see their soft, pale-green membranes stitched with threads of sinew, slender shafts of bone adhered over

her own bones to support them as they healed, and there, a patch on the left wing covering a hole torn by a vicious claw. Hali clamped both hands over her mouth so she wouldn't scream, tears seeping down her cheeks, her horrid wings collapsing again behind her, sinking from view at her back, cowering like the beaten, half-dead things they were. The harbormaster spoke rightly—how could she ever go home like this? Even if the breaks and tears healed in time, her wings would forever be seamed, her bones knotted. She looked like a child's toy, crudely made in the shape of a maiden. No one would seek out her hand, not like this—not ever again.

Then it was Aishynn's hand she remembered, dark and strong, reaching for hers in the darkness, bringing her back. Bringing her here to be healed while he was wounded ever deeper. Let her die in the desert next time—but he deserved better than the fate they had in mind. Hali shook off her own despair and examined the chamber.

Alas, water was the most precious thing these people had, and they protected it well: the room had no other doors or windows, only a narrow awning that bridged the natural stone cove at the back with the carefully built workshop in front, partitioned by its curtains.

Hali looked up, studying the woven ceiling, before she gripped the curtain, wrapping it with both arms and used it to clamber up the wall until she could get ahold of the top edge of the wall, just as she might have climbed a vine to a branch back in the forest. Her chest and wings throbbed, but she ignored the pain, inching on her belly along the top of the wall until it came back around to the cliff. Ropes pulled down the corner of the heavier awning that formed the ceiling, binding it to large stones at the outside to pull it tight against the wind.

Holding her breath and pushing hard, Hali squeezed herself between the awning and the wall, scraping and slithering down the other side to land in the drift of sand below. For a few minutes she gulped at the air. She sat at an inside corner. Across the undulated stone, she saw the hulls of a few ships in various states of repair or construction. She wished she could have waited for darkness, not only to cover her movements, but to follow the sound of Aishynn's voice. By then, they would have stolen his will and seized his hands, seeking to penetrate his memories and drag forth a truth they would not believe if he told them. She watched a few Dousani go by, studying them carefully, then shifted her wrappings, making sure they covered her motley wings, draped her brown hair and concealed her strange, pale face and hands. She must count on enough shadows in the layers of fabric around her face to hide her eyes from casual view.

When she saw no one in the near distance, Hali scrambled up and put on a purposeful walk. To this side lay the harbor and the long building of the workshop from which she had emerged. A series of docks and steps lead down to the edge of the Crystal Sea, their own queer, black chaiad's wing thrusting up alongside. Across the harbor, another rocky island loomed in the distance, its outline rough at one side, angular at the other. Hali squinted at it, not sure why it held her gaze, until she made out the truth: a huge sandship rested on its side there, cracked in half against the stone, its bow crushed, its masts split, sails torn, ropes dangling, swaying in the wind. For a moment, pressure built in her chest. The sandship Rollanor, destroyed by Aishynn's hand. For a moment, she hesitated. She went to the rescue of a madman, a traitor to his clan's deepest values, and to his people's soul.

Turning her back to the shipwreck, she walked on, letting her drapery drag a little on the ground to hide her feet, among the vessels and turned along the shore. Twice now, he had saved her. She owed him this effort at least. A few other, lower stone mounds pushed up among clusters of those lumpy stems and other, stranger plants. Flocks of skittering animals rushed from her steps as well, chittering as they went to ground beneath the spiky foliage. The smell of strange flowers and sharp spices tingled in the air, making her want to linger, to learn more about these silent folk. Larger creatures moved among the curious trees, with a handful of children tending them. The community was small—most Dousani lived on their sandships and came here only for repairs—but the island must hold all they needed to sustain their work: stockpiles of materials, workshops of looms and spinners, low huts where they lived. A few people noticed her passing, a few raising hands of greeting, but she kept on, walking fast to show her need was important, and hopefully to cover the rudeness of failing to return their gestures.

Rounding another lump of stone, Hali nearly ran out of island. The Crystal Sea sifted against the shoreline here, and, from further left, came a long, low moan that set her teeth on edge and her fine hairs quivering. She edged along, out of the shadow into the wind. At this side of the island, the stone spine thinned to a narrow edge, continuing in pierced arches off into the Crystals, framing the sinking of the first sun. Hali's eyes flared. Too soon! And she hadn't found him. Picking up the hem of her garment, she ran across the stone, under the arch. The wind moaned through narrow channels here, honed by them into hardened edges, twisting about in the holes and thrumming like an instrument. Stumbling, Hali almost fell into a pit that opened before her, catching herself on the rough wall of rock beside her.

Smoothly rounded, deeper than a mounder was tall, the bowl of stone lay open to the shifting sands, collecting a sprinkle of crystal with every blast of the wind, filling ever so slowly, with a moaning song like ghosts within the belly of Thra. At its heart, up to his knees in shifting sand, stood Aishynn, staring up at her as if he'd seen a ghost himself, his hands cupped before him, bearing a coiled snake with the bold yellow markings of the sand viper.

## Chapter 9 Mist and Viper

For a moment, staring at the snake, Hali couldn't breathe, Aishynn blinking up at her, his eyes glistening, then turned away, staring into his hands. "I have to get you out of there."

He gave a little shake of his head, then tipped it toward the snake in his hands. It lay at rest, drowsy with the mists of Estor or some other treatment, and the wrong move would rouse it. A single bite would leave Aishynn twitching, foaming, dead in moments. His whole body sagged, swaying slightly, as if the effort of holding his death in his hands had nearly overcome him. It was then the full cruelty of the punishment struck her: a Dousani would not speak without his hands.

"I'm coming down there," she said, firmly, in spite of the sharp, miniscule shake of his head, the anguish that bent his face. She unwound the cloth of her wrappings, tying one end of the head shawl around a notched rock outcropping. Hali knelt on the edge, clad in only her knee-length tunic, her hideous wings bared against her shoulders, gazing down at him as she lowered the other end of the bundled cloth. It didn't quite reach the treacherous, shifting ground beneath his feet, but it would be enough. Resisting the temptation to spread her wings and jump, she clung to the cloth and let herself slide down, then turned to face him, the sand sucking at her feet. Carefully, Hali approached

him, circling around, Aishynn following her with his eyes, still shaking his head, warning her away.

With wobbly steps, as precise as she could make them on the uncertain ground, Hali came up before him, both of them staring down at the resting serpent. A good length of it curled beneath its head, its nose just sticking over the circle of its body as if it waited for a chin-scratching. If they were to get out of this alive, she had only one chance at this. As a child of the woodlands, she had caught her share of gervas in the forest pools, but they could only snap their jaws, frill their cheeks and slap her with a sticky tongue if she missed. Her hands were quick, her fingers strong from years of playing her flute.

Aishynn produced a tiny, strangled sound, and she glanced up, catching his gaze on a level with her own, his feet and ankles buried in sand. He ran his tongue over his chapped lips and mouthed, "Don't do this."

Which of them would die, if she failed? Would the snake be fast enough to strike them both, or would she still have time to flee and climb back up the cloth? Simple: she must not fail. Hali took a deep breath, and let it out slow as if she prepared for a concert before the matriarch. She shook out her fingers, tapped them together in pairs, an exercise that helped her prepare for the fast fingerwork of dancing tunes. Then, she offered a smile, hoping it looked bolder than she felt, and said, "Hold still."

With a single, sharp gesture Hali shot out her hand and pinched the snake's nose, clamping its mouth shut as she lifted it from his hands. The serpent's eyes opened to slits of fury, its body thrashing and twisting, slapping her leg and arm. She took two quick steps back from Aishynn, caught the snake's neck in her other hand and gave it a yank,

feeling the bones break, feeling a brief regret that any living thing should be so brutally killed—but there was no choice, not here. Its limp form dangled from her hand.

Across from her, Aishynn collapsed to the sand, black hair spread around him, gasping for breath, hands shaking as he cradled their emptiness. Hali dropped the snake and went to him, reaching out, but still he shied from her touch, the hard line of his jaw revealing his exhaustion. Instead, she dug toward his feet, finding a stout cord that wrapped his ankles beneath the sand, looping to a stone with a hole at its center. She burrowed her fingers in, pulling at the knot.

Wiping away the sand from his hands, not raising his head, Aishynn wearily gestured, *I did not think to see you again, but you are healed! I did not think they would let you see me, not before the Sea swallows me whole.*

"They don't know I'm here," she told him. "I overheard them, talking about—"but she cut herself off, unwilling to tell him what they planned.

Shaking his head against the pillow of sand, Aishynn said, *Leave me, let me be. Hali*—her name was a sweep of his hand, a turn of his wrist that made sent a shiver down her back as if he had stroked her with his palm—*they will let you go free, without me. Even if you cannot go home, any village would be pleased to have you.*

"I need your help! We have to find the Horn of Thunder."

*Let it stay hidden, Hali, gelflings will find a way to defeat the skeksis without it.*

"What if they find it first?"

His chin tipped up, his chapped lips parting, then he gave a complex gesture she could not understand, or merely a series of fragments as he tried to imagine what that might mean. Or as if the coming night brought with it his madness.

With the final release of his ankles, Hali asked what she had to, what she hated to. "Aishynn, is it possible that skekTek found out about it, through you?"

The hurt that crossed his face made Hali regret the question the moment she asked, but he answered, in curt, hard movements, *It is possible. Anything is possible—I, don't remember! Leave me here and let me be buried in sand forever!* He flung his hands apart as if refusing to say another word, spread upon the sand, waiting for death.

"No, I won't." She glanced around, seeing only towering rocks, pitted with holes, crystal sand, the sinking sun that drew twilight across the sky. "Your night self doesn't want to die, your night self never stops fighting." She looked back down at him.

*My night self?* He looked dazzled and mystified.

"You're not mad, Aishynn. You swallowed an extra soul. Part of him is there, inside you. Night makes him more real, dawn and dusk, you and he are both lost, trying to make sense of your separate worlds. It's like coming out of a cave into the daylight—or going into a lodge from the campfire, for a while, you can't see at all, everything is confusion and fear. It all makes perfect sense, if you think about it."

His lips worked, his hands briefly knotted together, and she could see the struggle beginning, that other spirit tugging at his thoughts.

"Come on, Aishynn. We don't have all night."

Aishynn shot her a look, then scrambled for the wall, reaching up, pushing onto his toes to grab the end of the cloth. Barely, he managed it, but by the time he reached the lip of the bowl, his entire body trembled and he crawled over the top, panting for breath. Then a few tall shadows shifted, shadows not of stone, and Aishynn pulled his

feet up, curling into himself. They were here, come to finish what skekTek had started and drive him mad forever.

Hali cast about for a weapon, anything, and saw the dead snake. She seized it once more by the head, then scrambled for the cloth, even as the first Dousani peered over the edge. "Stay back!" she shouted. "Stay back, or I'll toss you a viper!"

With a little cry of consternation, the Dousani retreated, hands cutting desperate gestures in the sky. One handed, Hali scrambled up the cloth, pitching herself forward as the harbormaster took the idea of cutting too far and hacked at her cloth ladder. He was too late. She pushed herself up, brandishing the snake, jerking her arm around so the body thrashed and swayed. "Get away from him."

Four Dousani clustered there, Imara who had nursed her, the harbormaster, and two strangers, one of them clutching a tall crystal vessel, smoke spiraling inside it, the other carrying a rope. Hali bared her teeth and growled, making them flinch back against the wall.

"Please," Imara began, with imploring gestures, "there is no cause for you to be so—"

"I know what you're trying to do, and it's wrong—I won't let you." She held up the snake, but the harbormaster squinted at it, leaning a little forward. He looked unconvinced. Hali sprang forward and knocked off the lid of the crystal vessel, then jumped back again as the mist roiled out into the face of the man who carried it. The harbormaster, still studying the snake, didn't notice until his eyes went suddenly vague, but the ropebearer stumbled away—until Hali and her snake forced him back again. Better to lose his will to the mists of Estor for a few hours than to lose his life to a viper.

"He saved your life, little one, of course you are loyal, but you do not know his crimes, the danger he is to you, to all of us." Imara retreated from where the three men stood, their eyes relaxed and vacant. The wind circled around, blowing the mists in her direction, and she pressed her shawl over her nose and mouth.

"And you don't know his heart." Hali stared until the woman's eyes went vacant, staying out of the path of the swirling mist until it dissipated.

"Into the pit, all of you. In the morning, you can climb out again."

The harbormaster went first, tumbling over the side, sitting up in the sand while the others joined him, one by one, the rope-bearer last, after Hali had taken his rope, replacing her cloth garment with their rope as the route by which her prisoners would escape. "He risked his life to carry me here, knowing what would come—is that the act of a traitor, or a madman?" she shouted down to them, but they merely stared back at her with dull expressions, and she turned away.

Seated now, still shaky, Aishynn said, *Thank you*, but his gestures were uneven, barely understandable. The battle of dusk had begun, and Aishynn was losing.

What were they to do next? Even if they got back to their boat, he couldn't sail by night. Worst of all, if she didn't have a plan in the next few moments, she couldn't even ask him, couldn't talk with him, except as she might to herself. His language of gestures would be gone, along with his voice and, for a time at least, his reason. If they had a crystal, for the boat's heart, they might have speed and direction enough to flee the island without using the sail. And this was the harbor, where ships came to be repaired, surely the shipwrights kept crystals in storage just as they did the other supplies they would need.

Aishynn scrubbed his face, his fingers lingering over that scar. His hair hung down in dark tangles, his face made lean by hardship, his lips cracked from the lack of water, and she wished she could take him to that pool where she drank, where they had likely bathed her while she lay under the influence of the healing draught. He, too, was in need of healing. "Have they given you no food?"

*No water either*, he said in clumsy gestures. *Lucky you—no babbling fool tonight*. He touched his chapped lips and almost smiled. *Just the silent fool*.

"We have to go, to leave the island."

He mutely spread his hands, his every gesture, line and expression underscoring his exhaustion.

"Our boat is still there, and it shouldn't be hard to get to, but I don't know if we can sail it by night, not just me, and, well, you." They needed his day-self for that.

Aishynn merely gazed back at her, expectant, perhaps even encouraging. How much she missed his voice, whether by his lips or hands.

"You told me there are crystals at the hearts of these sandships. If we could get a crystal, we could lower the sail and still move. We'd also be less obvious against the sand than with the sail up, so we'd be harder to follow, but I don't know how we'd find a crystal in all of this—I can barely see already."

That slight smile, and he nodded, then he slowly stood, waiting a long moment to find balance, her hand hovering by his elbow, watching the jitters of his twilight madness even now, subdued by his weakness. Hopefully, they wouldn't need to fight any chaiads tonight. "The boat?" he mouthed, pointing first one way then the other.

"I'll show you." She held out the cloth to him, then, when his eyes squeezed painfully shut, his hands hanging limp, she gently draped it over his shoulders, wrapping it over his head, only his eyes visible. As he had said, she was a guest here, unless Imara had given some kind of alarm, and now, he looked just like everyone else. Prepared as they could be, they stepped out into darkness, moving carefully. Twice, he stopped her, and moments later, she saw someone else moving through the darkness, small lanterns held before them. Together, they moved toward the harbor, until they could see the black wing sail to one side, the long, low workshop building to the other. Here, he gave her a little push toward the boat, while he tipped his head the other direction.

Resisting, she murmured, "Will you be alright?"

A tiny shrug, a lifting of his brows. Who could know? Hali stepped away, watching as he moved unerringly toward the darkened building. When his form merged with the shadows, she hurried down at last to their boat, their prison, and now their freedom. Recalling the way he had raised the sail, Hali lowered it, securing it with a bit of line, fumbling in the dark. Her hands found the lumps of their stored tubers and a few shreds of Chaiad meat, then roamed over the navigation box and opened the lid. She waited for her eyes to adjust, but they helped not at all, so she ran careful fingers over the contraption within, finding the cradle that held the crystal, the narrow pins that would hold it bent from Aishynn's hasty removal of the broken crystal that shattered in his hand. The boat rocked a little, and he was there, lowering himself into the bow, holding out a handful of crystals in different sizes. He placed a few more things in the belly of the boat.

From the selection, Hali chose the crystal point most like the one that the matriarch had cracked, taking the point in her hand, frowning at the box. "Can you see the workings?"

Aishynn gave a grunt of assent.

"This needs to rest in the cradle of wires there, with a few little points that secure it, but I think they're bent."

A rustling sound, then his hand, lightly, startlingly on hers, warm despite the layer of cloth that he kept between them as he took back the crystal.

"I think the smoother side goes down," she said doubtfully, increasingly uncertain they could do anything in the dark to get the boat away.

Then stone scraped gently on metal and the boat shivered into motion. Hali caught the gunnels, but this was not the crazed movement of the broken crystal, rather it was smooth, steady, their speed increasing as the boat pushed through the sand and found its level, the Crystal Sea once more swishing along the sides, the stars to guide them, Hali's hand upon the rudder, and Aishynn quickly fast asleep.

## Chapter 10 Spiral and Ash

At dawn, he ranted silently, huddled in the bow, thumping the bone from time to time as if making an important point in an argument only he could hear. When it had passed, Hali gave him the last of the chaid meat and offered a tuber. The Sea here shone pink, even after the sun rose full above. The air held a mineral tingle that coated her throat, and a distant edge of land grew and stretched along the horizon. The beginning of Claw Mountain. To the other side, the horizon grew hazy as well and she wondered if she could be seeing the forest, a green and welcome relief after all of this sand. Even pink sand could not compete with the richness and color of the woodlands.

Aishynn ate slowly and clumsily, frowning at his fingers, then he glanced at her, with a flicking gesture a little like the exercises she used to prepare for a performance. With a chuckle, Hali demonstrated, watching as he repeated them, his hands a dark mirror of her own. He peered inside the box, raised his eyebrows, and smiled, then said, *Our night-selves seem to have done well.*

"Assuming we're still on course. Look." She pointed out toward the mountains.

*Hard to say. The stories tell us that the stars guide the way to the Horn, but at some point, it must be more specific.* He stepped carefully over the box and settled beside her, raising the black sail before laying his own hands upon the rudder.

"And we've lost our markers—they seem to have taken the cloak out when they carried me to be healed."

Aishynn watched the rough horizon, tucked the rudder beneath his elbow and told her, *They would have seen it as evidence, a sign of madness.*

"I'm sorry." She sucked on chunk of tuber, conserving the liquid in her mouth, recalling the deep pool of water.

*I thought they meant to leave me there to die, like the criminals of old. A prisoner can choose between the long, peaceful death of sand, and the short, awful death of the viper.* He glanced back at her. *Did they—you, heard them. Did they say why they were coming?*

She considered not telling him, concealing this betrayal his people intended, but the heavy weariness of his shoulders and the weight of his gaze told her he already guessed. "They planned to force a fasting, to use the mists of Estor to take your will and search your memories, to see what skekTek might have learned from you."

He drew a deep breath, his back toward her, and it came out ragged. *Thank you again, for saving me that. And saving them from dreamfasting a madman.*

"I touched you," she said. "We dreamfasted, just for a moment, but still, I'm not mad and you. . .you seem less mad than before."

A flock of something moved high overhead, and they both looked up to watch them go. *My night-self. I think he is Grottan.*

"Grottan? Of course! That would explain your night vision!"

He flashed a grin. *And my loudness. The Grottan talk all the time, down in the caves.*

"No wonder you're mad—Grottan and Dousani? They're as different—"

*As night and day. He gestured toward the growing mountains. That spur comes down to meet the Sea, almost cutting through to the Black River. It is the furthest point where you can see the Horn rise this time of year.*

"The end of the trail," she murmured.

*As far as the stars can take us anyhow. There must be something else, something we do not know.*

Throughout the day, they took turns at the rudder, resting in the shade of the great wing, Aishynn showing off his sailing skill by tacking the boat this way and that with great sweeps of the chaiad's wing, almost as if it were flying. The thought made a hollow open up in Hali's breast, her wings folded at her back, as tight as they could go, and still sloppy, poor posture as her mother would point out, but the bones beneath their layered patchwork might never allow her to close them fully again. She would go about like this, her wings confronting those around her, not only with their bizarre appearance, but with that slightly aggressive shape. A new cloak would help: the Dousani cloth, lovely as it was, barely concealed her misshapen wings.

Small islands became more numerous in this area—the excuse for Aishynn's feats of steering—and they stopped off to stretch their legs and gather more provisions, both delighted to find a spring bubbling up beneath a crag. Hali climbed up to the top after a long drink, while Aishynn scrubbed himself with the fresh water, finally washing away the sand of his long days, and the blood of his fierce battle. From the top of the crag, the longest Claw curved across the narrowing Crystal Sea as if reaching out to pluck the silvery thread of river. Forestland bounded the river and the land rose again beyond it, up to Aughra's Mount, her home and the place of the vast machine she used to study the

stars. Hali knew very little about Aughra—it had been a long time since the strange old woman had come down among the gelflings. Hali's skeksis music-lover had been taken there by the Spritons, in the hopes of finding a place secure enough to hold him, if not the aid of Aughra herself. The crystal dome of the vast observatory glinted, a tiny shimmer in the distance. Nestled deep in the forest lay the Woodlander city, the center of learning, placed there to gain the benefit of Aughra's wisdom and guidance, and that of the skeksis in their castle beyond. Hali shuddered and turned away.

Still, for a moment, she regretted that she had not been able to play again for the skeksis who loved her song, who said he had no home on Thra but when he heard her playing. Below, she saw Aishynn stretched out on the ground, his hair shining once more in the suns as it dried. Traitors all, and yet there was more to him than darkness. Could there be more to the skeksis, too? The skeksis shared so much, for so long, they could well be all evil, all liars, all darkness, all of the time. What if, within their twisted husks of corruption, there was a spark of hope? And what had that strange creature been who had prevented Alandra from killing the captive skeksis?

Aishynn stirred and rose, pushing back his hair, and Hali came down to meet him, to sail on toward their dream.

Twilight fast approached when they drew up to a cove of sand in the shadow of the Claw, dropping their curious sail and stilling the spinning crystal heart. The last part of the journey, Aishynn began to mutter, waving her off, and so she let him pass his madness on his own, pacing up the shore, but never out of earshot. With the day of smooth sailing and juicy roots, his voice returned, and the rant pursued her along her way, up a narrow ledge, out onto the spur of stone, to stop with a gasp.

A fire burned before her, circled by stones with spiraled patterns. Little towers of similar stones marked rings around the fire all across the flat area and part way down the slope, tucked into depressions in the stone, carefully balanced, some of them marked with feathers that fluttered in the wind. At her back, Aishynn cursed himself, and before her, another voice intoned a single note. Beyond the fire, where a few twisted trees began, a large figure sat cross-legged, staff in hand, long neck raised as it toned into the dusk. Two other hands circled carefully before it, a fourth held vertically, its long palm painted with another spiral.

Her own music lifted her, making her feel as if she could fly, while this tone moved through stone and up, up into Hali's bones, grounding her as if she, too, were part of the mountain. She gasped, stepping back from the circle of firelight.

As if at her summons, Aishynn dashed up the path to stand beside her, a knife in his hand, and she suddenly remembered the other things he had brought out of the workshop—and remembered the long scar on the harbormaster's arm. Her throat tightened.

"What is this?" Aishynn murmured, and Hali allowed herself to relax at the clarity of his voice; for now, at least, the madness had gone.

"It's the creature, the one who stopped Matriarch Alandra from killing the skeksis," she whispered back, matching his reluctance to raise voices in this unsettling place.

The creature lowered its head then, the fringes of its hair settling down either side of its neck, regarding them from deep eyes. "Two live who were sent to die." Its lower

hands moved together in a round gesture of greeting, but the third pointed to the ground before it, the space between the creature and the fire. "Welcome."

With a shared glance, the gelflings walked forward into the light, his knife gleaming, gripped tight and ready. The creature watched them come, separating its hands, inviting them to either side. They stayed together, with careful steps between the little towers of stones and feathers, until they could see the pattern etched in the rock of the Claw. A series of rings and spirals, stacked with circles and triangles, cut into the bedrock, weathered with age, topped with a scattering of other stones and markings added more recently. With one hand, the creature displayed a shell filled with some dark powder. "Before you saw me last, I made a prophecy—it is what brought me here, to you, to make another one."

"A prophecy?" Aishynn asked. "I don't understand."

The creature smiled, a sad, wise smile given its deep eyes and long mouth. "The name, gelfling, means those who do not see the future. I am urSol, of the urRu, and I do. Not so clearly as some of my race, but clearly enough. I am the Chanter, the keeper of tones so mighty they might shiver the mountains. These spirals, these signs, show what may be." His hands gestured gracefully over the ancient carving and the new markings that embellished it.

Frowning, tracing the patterns with his eyes, Aishynn moved around to the side of the urRu, cocking his head. "I see the suns, I think, and the moons. These markings mean nothing to me." He indicated a series of strange hooks or barbs around the edges and at various places within the design.

urSol made a low tone. "These do not concern you, but your enemy, the skeksis. You will meet again those you have trusted. You will wish to trust again, but evil will come of it." His gaze flitted to the side, lids lowering. In the dark, with only the flicker of firelight from below, he reminded Hali of a skeksis himself and she shivered.

"You're saying we can't trust the skeksis," Aishynn said, kneeling to examine the symbols more closely.

"It is understandable why one might think one could, one with an open heart and a trusting soul, one who had yet to see much of the world."

Hali bristled a little at that. They were young, true, but they had faced dangers no other gelfling knew, and done it together. Two who were meant to die, and yet they lived.

Moving again, examining the pattern from every angle, Aishynn said, "I trusted skekTek and look what's become of me."

The urRu made a low thrumming noise. "And you are not alone in this mistake." He gazed at Hali, a heavy, piercing gaze, the gleaming firelight making his eyes dark wells of a depth that could not be contained by a single world.

"Music," she whispered, hugging herself. "He liked my music."

"He had the chance to go home, to take all of his people home, away from here, and it was music that held him back."

No home beneath the stars but when you play, the skeksis had told her, but she said nothing, listening intently.

"The music turned his heart black and sour. It turned him away, made him unworthy to return." The hand grasping the staff twisted to and fro as he spoke. "And

so, he ruined the chance, ruined it for them all. Liked your music? Say rather that it was a reminder of his evil, a reminder of what he had destroyed. Given the moment, he would have destroyed you, rather than to suffer such a memory."

Hali shook her head, just a little. "I'm not sure that was all."

"The urRu know the skeksis, know them as no other could, have known them for a hundred lives of gelflings. How long did you play for the skeksis?"

"Three days," she mumbled, chastened.

Another rumble of sound that made her feet itch and her ears ring. Opposite her now, Aishynn did not seem to notice.

"Why didn't it destroy me then?" Hali asked. "Or take me to the castle to be drained of my soul?"

At that, Aishynn's head came up, his eyes keenly upon her, and she regretted the mention of such a painful thing. To her, it was a horror, to him, it was personal.

"It wished to find the Gathering, to learn more, more than you would have told, even had you trusted it completely."

Hali ducked her head, for the skeksis had, indeed, found the Gathering and might have lurked about, dressed in the cast-off Dousani robe to hear their counsel if Alandra had not unmasked it.

"How do we stop them?" Aishynn asked, squatting at urSol's side. "What can we do?"

"Can't we send them home?" Hali asked.

urSol gave a sound like laughter. "That is a difficult journey, child. Not all will take that journey willingly. Some prefer things as they are—"

"With us in their power," Aishynn muttered, "at their command." He tapped the blade of the knife against his off hand, as if looking for some place to thrust it.

"Just so." Three hands and urSol's face focused on Aishynn. "You must keep this anger, it gives you strength to defeat them."

"But at the Gathering, you said not to kill them," Hali pointed out. The creature's demeanor and its tone felt wrong, in some way she could not quite articulate. It wasn't the things he said, or the way he said them, but his voice in itself. Its music came and went, as if it sometimes hid behind the sound.

"If they die, the balance is diminished. They need not die, not at your hands, yet you may subdue them. Even I do not see all the pattern, not yet." Its hands moved again spiral. "I see that the gelflings will reach for prophecy. I see that you—"it gestured toward Aishynn—"you will again be tempted." It paused, as if distracted.

It leaned in close to the pattern, and reared back with a hiss, then reached out and smeared the drawing, still hissing.

"I fail, don't I? Again, I'm tested, again, I fail." Aishynn threw up his hands and eyes filled with firelight, bright and frightening. "Tell me, urSol, am I the one who brings the skeksis down on us, who starts the battle? Tell me the truth!"

"The truth? You must look within yourself for that, within your sharp-divided heart." It gave a deep sigh, shifting the strange coat it wore. "I would not wish to live as you, each day your light haunted by your shadow."

Across the fire, Aishynn's stricken gaze swept the patterns, up to urSol, last to Hali, just before he fled into the darkness.

## Chapter 11 Aishynn's Reward

"Aishynn!" she screamed after him, and even stumbled down the path he followed, but once beyond the fire, she could not make out the way, nor see his figure running, his night-self taking hold and letting him run. She sank to her knees, gasping against the pain in her chest, his own naked pain emblazoned on her heart. Let that not be the last she saw of him, let the urRu's terrible truth not be the last words he ever heard. He was more than that, more than a broken spirit or warring souls, and she should have told him before now. He took their dreamfasting for an accident, a thing he feared, a thing she wished could be undone, but now she knew that nothing could be further from the truth. Oh, yes, she had followed urSol's wisdom on that: she looked within herself and knew that it was more than shared suffering that bound her to Aishynn, more than an accident that they flew through the stars at the clasp of their hands. And now, she might never see him again.

Keep your anger, the urRu said, to use against the skeksis—but her anger was for him. She pushed herself to her feet, gathering fury, letting it wipe away the memory of her injuries.

Rounding on the urRu, Hali marched back to the fire. "How could you say that to him? He can't simply tear out half his heart!"

"He asked me to speak the truth, and so I have done," urSol replied, but with his hands spreading in a plea for peace. "Would you have me lie, like a skeksis?"

"No—I would have you feel! I would have you listen and watch and love and fear and worry and care," she shot back at him, then took a sharp breath. "Like a gelfling."

It settled back, knees bent, tail curled and slightly twitching. "Like a gelfling. This is what you would wish for another. I do watch. I do. . .listen." It tilted its head. "I hear anger and fear. I see these things as plainly in you as in your future. I see these things, I do not seek them. Is there love without hate?"

That wasn't a question Hali expected, it wasn't one that she could answer.

urSol stroked a hand along its throat, thrumming gently. "I am not gelfling, I cannot be. I should not be." Then its head sank down, examining the patterns. "You can see how he is wounded by carrying this darkness. Your lives are. . .hurtful, so often blind, so often lost. The patterns I have cast show me all of this."

"You told us yourself that you're not very good at them," Hali retorted.

"I am certain my skill is enough, and I am at peace with this." It held the staff across its body, a few small spiral stones dangling. "I came as a warning, and so, you are warned. Your companion sees the danger in himself, even if you do not. Stars and dreams will be forever different, if you go home."

"I am at peace with that." Arms folded, she stood as tall as she could, perhaps up to its higher elbow, so long as it remained seated.

The urRu rose, pushing with its staff, rearing up to its full height to stare down at her. "You do not look at peace, child. Not at all." Its gaze shifted to one side, then the

other, and Hali realized that her awful wings had spread with her fury, grateful, all of a sudden, for the half-light that hid her flush.

urSol moved away, striding tall, tail lashing as it disappeared in the darkness toward the river far below.

Hali sank to her knees when it was gone, covering her face with her hands. Such a fool! This ancient, knowing creature tried to talk to her, to tell her the future, but she so hated the truth that she drove it away. Of course, it couldn't look upon her, of course it had no wish to be more like a gelfling, insignificant, confused, conflicted—any more than it wanted to be like the dark and hideous skeksis. Admittedly, she and Aishynn represented the very bottom of the swamp where gelflings were concerned, the sort of creeping, miserable creatures that Sifa used to bait their fishhooks, that, she knew, in spite of all of her bold words, first to the Dousani, now to the urRu. She was getting to be as bad as Aishynn at dusk: loud.

Huddled in her miserable state, quite in spite of herself, Hali laughed. *Loud*. The very worst insult the Dousani could imagine. She laughed, and tears streamed down her face, drying on her cheeks through that long, lonely night. She barely slept, warmed a little by the fire, waking when it had gone entirely to ash, missing the muttering of Aishynn's night-self as dawn began to rise. By then, she knew that sleep was done, and simply waited for the light. She returned to the boat for the last of the food they had carried, finding two stoppered water jugs with straps, a coil of slender rope, a second knife as well as a kit with flint and tinder, various crystals, a replacement for that water-gathering device they used that first awful day. Each item she discovered made her throat feel tight. In the dark, with his Grottan vision, Aishynn prepared for a trip, gathering all

sorts of things that might be useful to them, her own words somehow giving him hope where before he had only despair. Here were the supplies for a journey, a quest they were meant to undertake together.

She gathered most of these things into a bundle, tucking the knife through her belt where her flute used to hang, and took a moment to secure the boat, the sandship Darkwing she dubbed it, with a feeling almost of affection. It might be that Aishynn would return here, retreating to the desert rather than face what the urRu claimed for his destiny. At least, his little vessel would be waiting for him. Chewing on a bite of tuber, Hali ascended the trail into the full light of early morning and stopped short, her eyes once more flooding with tears, blinked rapidly away.

Aishynn sat there, in the place urSol had vacated, head bowed as he studied the carving and the marks that overlaid it. He looked up at her and his face lit, his hands forming the beautiful gestures of her name. *Hali. Forgive me for running, again.*

"Of course," she said, then sank down beside him with the supplies from the boat. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

He tapped her arm and directed her attention to the fire circle where the coals still glowed, mounded up now and exuding the exquisite smell of roasting meat. *My night-self is an excellent hunter. When he is quiet.*

Laughing, she reached for him, then let her hand fall short and drew it back into her lap. A moment later, his hand, dark and tentative, touched the back of hers.

*Will you.* . . he formed the words tentatively with the other hand, then brought them both together and began again. The words of a single hand were short, plain and

without subtlety. With two, he had grace and precision. *I need to know if skekTek touched my mind, if he stained me, if this entire quest was at his urging. I need to know.*

"What are you saying?"

*I know you have no wish to Dreamfast with me. It was a mistake, that first time,* but, he looked down at his hands, then continued, *will you help me to be sure?*

"You don't know anything!" she said, slapping down her tuber. "That Dreamfast, that was one of the most amazing things that ever happened to me. I was afraid, worried it would do something to me, afraid of you, Aishynn—"he nodded, lips pressed together, but she reached out to stroke his face, letting her thumb trail along the rough, short ridge of his scar—"but I am no longer. I know you, Aishynn, I've known you night and day and dawn and dusk. I wish you were asking for my sake, but I'll do it for yours."

For a moment, his eyes were closed, his face tipped back toward the sky, then he smiled, opening into a grin more luminous than dawn. *For your sake, Hali, I would swim the Crystal Sea and brave the chaiad's nest to carve you a flute from its sharpest claw.* He faced her fully then, opening his hands, and she found herself matching his brave and foolish grin.

Hali waited, letting him be the one, her own hands open and ready to receive him as he reached out, placed his palm ever so gently over hers, letting his fingers slide between hers, holding on to her as he had done when she was falling, but, this time, as if he were the one who could at any moment be swept away forever. Dreamfasting. A vision sprang to life between them, misty at first, and gradually more clear, as if they gazed together into the past from a high place.

Trees, the swaying, tangled dertres of her home, thick with mosslers, buzzing with flyters in the sultry heat of summer, her mother weaving at the loom and singing as her father played. . .

*It's beautiful! I've never been there. Only once. . .* and his voice in her heart carried the pain of that moment, the first time he ever entered the woodlands, when they brought him toward the Gathering, a traitor awaiting his death.

*You'll come again, and see it for the first time.*

. . .the brilliant sheen of the Crystal Sea, red sand shifting toward a dusky blue, rising and falling, tiny Aishynn held tight in his father's hands over the prow of a huge sandship, little hands wide, wispy hair flying in the wind, his hands in a clear and marvelous gesture, upraised in celebration, laughing, laughing, laughing. . .

. . .music swelled around her as she played for the dancing, for the festival, her notes filling hearts with joy. . .

*I dreamed that someday I would play for the queen.*

*Someday, you will. Your music, it's like the crystal that steers a sandship.*

. . .crystals lit from within, turning in balance, turning from the dark and light fragments that filled the Crystal Sea, the sparkling heart of a sandship spinning its way across the Sea, Aishynn's hands learning to guide it. . .

. . .darkness, the gleam of crystals in the walls, the damp, the eternal dripping of the comforting eternal night, the mushroom harvest, moist and tender. . .

. . .stars glimpsed through a opening in the branches, Hali climbing vines to the top of a tree, staring up at the moon, then down at the river below, leaping into the sky,

the wind in her hair, the leaves tickling her outstretched hands until her wings spread to catch her, soaring downward, a joy kept secret until now. . .

. . .a chamber full of secrets, of crystals and beams, of gears and knobs and spinning things, a vial of entrancing liquid, swirled before his eyes, the lowered lids of his mentor, his master, inviting him to drink. . .

. . .a lonely hill where her flute music danced only upon the wind, until one comes who longs for her song, as he longed for the stars, a stranger hiding in shadows, needing what she could give, what she held so near to her heart. . .

*Your flute, you've lost it.*

*I have found you.*

*How do we steer this craft?*

*We need to return to the castle, to your memories,* and they were there, watching as his hands tuned delicate instruments, listening to the rumbling cadence of a skeksis voice, now a purr of encouragement, now a hiss of dismay, its four, huge, crabbed hands scraping up tools, prodding and directing, another gelfling glimpsed beyond, Aishynn, in memory, annoyed at the incessant jabber of their voices.

*What about the Horn? Did you ever tell him that?*

*I don't want to see, to go back there,* he said, with an edge of fear that chilled her, *but I have to.* They filtered through a dozen days, sifting the memories, returning to the worst, the day of Aishynn's sorrow. . .

"You wish to see the stars, yes? To understand them more fully than any of your kind ever before, and this will aid you to do so," skekTek purred, swirling the vial that glowed an alluring, disturbing blue.

Aishynn shook his head and made a few gestures, more graceful, more assured than now, but he whispered at the same time, "It feels. . .wrong. How was it made? I did not see you working on it."

"I do wish that you would speak up" the skeksis said, but lightly, as if this were a complaint often aired, never heeded, as if he did not know how great a concession had already been made that Aishynn spoke at all. "I wished to surprise you, to reward you for all of your effort. Just think, after this, you will be ready for the Orrery, Aughra's great device—even that will be no more mystery to you. I gave it to her—did you know that?—and we shall go there together."

"Have you already given some to Tsarev?" Aishynn glanced about, not finding his fellow apprentice.

"Tsarev has had his reward. This is for you." skekTek settled one of his hands on Aishynn's shoulder, a weight less reassuring than commanding. "Drink, to your great future, to all of those journeys where clear sight will aid you, to the stars awaiting your visions."

Aishynn lifted the vial to his face, tipped it up, watching the liquid swirling and sighing, entranced by the blue glow of the strange, unnatural stuff.

skekTek's grip shifted, one clawed hand seizing Aishynn's skull as if to pierce right through it, his other hand shoving the bottle, forcing it upward, Aishynn's throat extended, his head bent back as he struggled. The scientist's third hand grabbed his chin and wrenched open his mouth, piercing his cheek, the vial draining between his teeth. Gagging, kicking, Aishynn snared one of the tools from the desk, stabbing at the claws that clutched him. Then his body went rigid. A terrible warmth seared down his throat, a

suffocating moisture rich with the flavor of mushrooms, of blood, of darkness itself filling his mouth and nose, drowning him, snarling down into his stomach and racing through him, body and mind.

The vial fell away, the terrible hands dragging him up onto the high table, knocking over crystals and tools, wires and lenses, things shattering, the skeksis shrieking with excitement, its glittering eyes staring into his as it held down his shuddering form. The scientist's third hand brought up a shard of crystal set in a frame of metal and held it before Aishynn's eyes, peering into one, then the other, then flipping the frame, to stare down at him again, dragging his eyes open with that fourth hand.

Aishynn struggled and fought, otherness sweeping over him, gasping, choking, his stomach roiling, one of skekTek's hands now pressed against his mouth, stopping his voice, stopping his body's rejection of that draught of death. Screams echoed through his heart, caged within him as if the terror of his own voice would rip him apart.

## Chapter 12 Raunip's Orb

*Come back to me, Aishynn, Hali breathed through him. Come back to me. It's over, you're safe, you're here, there's nobody's hand but my own.*

Still gasping, almost tearing free of her touch, Aishynn shook all over. Hali clasped his hand in both of hers, crooning a song of comfort, missing her flute as never before. "You're no traitor, Aishynn," she whispered. "Not for a moment."

He shuddered before her and she stroked his shoulder. "I was tempted," he breathed. "I will be again."

The sound of his voice in the daylight, even so weakly, gave her pause. SkekTek urged him to speak aloud, to use his voice, then clamped his mouth with terrible strength to stop him screaming. No wonder he dare not speak by daylight. She kept his hand, clinging to him as if the strength of her grip alone could convince him. "You didn't tell him about the Horn, you never spoke of it."

His hand slipped free of hers, but gently, to speak with his full eloquence. *A small blessing.*

"No small thing, Aishynn. Even then, you did not give him everything, no matter what he took from you."

*I had forgotten Tsarev. He was my friend, then, in spite of his being so. . . loud.* He flinched as he said it, and she remembered his agony that first night they met, collapsing beneath Alandra's biting questions, sobbing that he would never know who's

essence he had swallowed. Even then, his regret had been palpable. *He was Grottan, quick with his hands. We rarely worked together—he couldn't stand the light, I couldn't see in the dark. A helpless shrug. At dawn and dusk we met, both of us complaining, and skekTek gave him his reward.* The word twisted Aishynn's mouth with anger, his hands forming accents of irony and anger. *How could I have forgotten him?*

"How could you contain him?" Hali asked, very gently. "Only by madness, Aishynn, only by tearing yourself apart."

*I'm sorry, for putting you through that.*

"No! Aishynn, no. I'm sorry you had to go through it again—that you had to go through it the first time." It was a scene, a horrid sensation, that she knew she would never forget, and she pushed it away for now, seeking a bright place to return to. "You're starting to put yourself together again. Have you noticed? Last night, you recognized some of the symbols on the urRu's design, even though you were in your night-self." She hesitated to put a name to that self, the one who had vanished inside him. "And just now, you spoke aloud, softly, but still, I heard you. You're finding your way back from madness."

*Thanks to you.* Dark and keen, he met her gaze, so intense that she was the one who dropped her eyes, who smiled and laughed a little nervously.

"We should check the roast."

*And the prophecy.* Taking up a stick, Aishynn raked away the coals and unwrapped some thick leaves to reveal a steaming assortment of things. They looked delicious and unfamiliar at the same time. *Mushrooms, nuts and something that lived among them.*

Well, she had eaten chaiad meat, and that turned out fine. They shared the meal, studying the patterns of the urRu prophecy spiral as they ate. Hali's gaze returned over and over to the upper edge, near where urSol had said that Aishynn would be tempted, where the urRu had stuck out one hand and wiped away part of the pattern. "What was there? Do you remember?"

*This, I think.* He indicated a claw-shaped symbol that occupied the carved edge of the largest circle. *Maybe one of these,* pointing to a graceful shape of lines opposite the claw. *I cannot be sure. They were connected or crossing in some way.*

The symbols looked familiar, but Hali wasn't sure either where she might have seen them. Disappointed, she sat back on her heels. "Maybe he was right—maybe gelflings just aren't meant to know the future."

Aishynn flicked one of the little piles of stones, setting the feathers to swinging. *What next?*

"If not the future, then the past. Finding the Horn is still our best chance against the skeksis. What else do your stories say?"

He shrugged, spreading his hands. *Nothing more than yours.*

"Our stories say he hid it in the sky, and yours told us to follow the stars—what comes next in the pattern?"

*Jarra-Jen points this direction, with the Horn ahead of him, but the Horn can't be seen past this spur. The next pattern isn't a constellation, it's a void, truly nothing.*

"Raunip's Orb, right? That blank patch in the sky." Hali frowned. "But if Jarra-Jen and the Horn are pointing this way, if he named those stars, meaning for us to find the

Horn if we ever needed it, surely he wouldn't have made it a dead end, leading to nothing."

Aishynn paced, circling the prophecy in a spiral of his own, then stared out across the landscape, the Crystal Sea narrowing and torn into sandy valleys by the outstretched claws of the mountains. *No, not nothing. Raunip's Orb. It is a darkness, an opening. A cave.* He thrust out his arm, pointing, and she scrambled up to stand beside him.

There, across the valley, a dark, round hole, leading inward. Hali shivered. "Most of the people who come to these mountains never return."

*It would not be the first time we believed we would never return.* He gave her arm a gentle squeeze, and they gathered their things, ready for the journey.

They spent the better part of that day scrambling down narrow tracks, startling herds of bishoff that snorted and rustled into the scraggly trees. The day grew warm, but never so hot as it had been in the desert, and they wrapped their heads with pieces torn from the crystalweave garment to ward off the sun. By the time they drew near the cave entrance, weary and ragged, hands and feet scraped from stones and the spiky werros that sometimes rolled across the path just to spite them, Hali and Aishynn both needed the rest. She watched and hoped, as the suns sank low, but he rubbed at his eyes, shaking his head and muttering, those old arguments returning, his mind pulled in two directions.

Hali felt like weeping, watching him, his grace and strength transformed by the waning light into confusion, fear and anger, harsh gestures, fading whispers, until he slumped against the tallest tree, its branches gnarled and outspread like a clawed hand, his forehead pressed against it, his shame almost a thing she could touch. He hated being like this, hated that she could see him like this, and that it brought such pain to those

around him. No wonder he feared the Dreamfasting. She studied herself for a moment, searching for any sign of madness. None, unless her concern for him could be considered mad—no doubt the matriarchs would declare it so. They had not seen, or had not cared to see, that he carried silence and sound, strength and weakness, courage and fear and how he fought to find his balance in the shifting sands of his own heart.

She knew better than to try to touch him now, but endured the twilight, preparing a simple meal with things they had gathered along the way.

"I hoped, when you said I was getting better, than I wouldn't have to go through that again." He sighed and dropped down beside her.

"Me, too, but there you have it. Dawn and dusk, that's not so bad." She chewed a handful of berries. "I wondered how you struck the chaiad like that, in the dark. I could barely see it except when it blocked the starlight."

"When it grabbed you with its tail and just tossed you up to its feet, I was afraid it would fly off with you, so I struck its wing first, hoping the tear would slow it down. After that, I just had to aim for the eye."

"As if it were so easy," she snorted, rubbing her back, then gave a sigh of her own. "I suppose we must enter the cave at night."

"I'll be able to see best then, and it won't make a difference to you either way."

"I'll still be blind," she agreed.

"Not that it matters when we hardly even know what to look for. The stars have lead us this far, but now we won't have even that. We'll just have to trust in Jarra-Jen, legend and hero."

"A Woodlander, like me." She grinned, and Aishynn gave a snort.

"Come on, then." He stood up, and reached back to give her his hand.

They did not Dreamfast this time, but a tingle of warmth filled her palm at his touch, a gentle awareness of him, his spirit, his heart. Together, they climbed the last, steep slope up to the mouth of the cave. In the low light, Hali thought the opening looked much bigger than it had from across the valley, a vast, gaping hole, not unlike Raunip's Orb, a passage ripped into the place beyond. "We should tie ourselves together, so we don't get separated."

Leaving a short length of rope between them, they moved on, still hand in hand for as long as possible. Once they entered the cave, leaving behind the purpling sky and its nest of stars, darkness enveloped them, and Hali's heart thudded in her chest, seeming to press on her aching ribs, her wings held tight and close. Their footfalls echoed just a little, indicating a broad, high space, and the floor sloped downward, uneven, but not so much that she lost her footing.

"It's warm—warmer than I expected," said Aishynn, walking just ahead. "The floor is smooth for a long way, but there are stones toward the edges, and there's white—he stopped, cleared his throat and said, "There's some white markings, too."

Warm, yes, and damp, and smelly enough to wrinkle her nose with the rank odor of animals. "Is there anything else? Anything. . .living?"

"I don't see anything."

She could hear the swish of his hair as he looked around. "It's big enough to hold hundreds, maybe thousands, bigger than any chamber I saw in the palace." He stopped abruptly and she bumped into him, catching his shoulder, catching her breath. "I remembered that, the palace, just now." He started walking again, carefully, but with the

confidence of vision. "I'm looking for openings or passages, other ways out, but right now. . ."

"Maybe we should head for one of the walls and follow that around."

"No," he said sharply, then more quietly, "no, I don't think that's a good idea. It looks a bit slick over there. We should keep our voices down, just in case."

"In case of what?" she said softly, then something crunched under her foot. She lurched forward a step to wrap herself around his arm. "What is it, Aishynn? What do you see?"

"Bones," he answered. "Just bones. Not gelfling. Bishoff, maybe."

Bishoff. A creature twice her height, like a shaggy boulder with a spiky tail. Her throat felt very dry and she could not get the moisture to wet her lips. "Then whatever lives here, or comes here, it must be very, very large."

Another sound echoed in the cavern, a soft rustling, then a sharp, familiar chittering that made her wings throb. Aishynn wrapped his arms around her and threw them both to the ground, covering her head, pulling her to him as the chittering grew accompanied by a terrible wind and the leathery flap of a hundred vast wings. Hali screamed into his chest, smothering her panic against him, her hands very small and helpless as she clung to him. Bones pressed into her side—not her bones, but those of the dead, the feast that served so many chaiads, so many that their rushing beat at her like the drumming of a thousand dancers, like the pulsing of a giant, angry heart.

The wind blew past at last, leaving the cave silent, but for the desperate panting of the two gelflings.

"They're gone," breathed Aishynn over her bent head. "Are you hurt?"

"No more than before." Her chest and wings ached with the memory of pain, of claws, of being torn upward from stone and plunging down again. "You saw them, didn't you."

He stroked her hair. "Only after we were well inside. I didn't want to worry you."

"Next time, worry me. I'd rather be ready, and I'm already blind."

With a breath of laughter, he said, "I understand. Are you ready to go on?"

"That depends, is there anything else you're not telling me?"

"An awful lot of chaidads make an awfully big mess. That's why we're not walking along the edge."

Hali struck his chest, but they were both laughing, now that the danger had passed. "You did say that you would cross the chaidads' nest for me."

"Not a promise I meant to keep, I assure you."

"I was terrified—I still am, come to that. Why aren't you afraid?"

"This place. It's . . .familiar. Not like a memory, not like the Crystal Sea, but I still feel safe here, as if I know what it's like, what to expect. The chaidads. I know that I don't have to be afraid of them."

"Now you really are mad," she muttered, rolling and sitting up, fingering the long bone of a bishoff's leg from the knobbed end that had been a joint all the way to the fracture where a chaidad had bitten it off.

His silence had a heavy quality, and Hali said, "I'm sorry. I should know better than to make such a jest."

He squeezed her shoulder. "It's true, though. I spent all my life in the Crystal Sea, in the desert, and now I feel at home in a cave, when I can't see the stars and don't

even know where I am. The stars have been my life—I never imagined I could live without them."

"You haven't lost your stars, Aishynn, they're here—"she touched his chest, resting her fingertips on the heat of his beating heart—"they're still inside you."

"But I don't think they'll lead us to the Horn, not this time."

"The chaiads are out. Whether they're dangerous or not, I think it's the best time to explore this place. Which way do we go, oh great navigator?"

He drew her up by the hand and they moved on into the darkness. "Pillars of stone hang down from the ceiling, and some stick up from the floor. Some of them even meet in the middle, like tree trunks of stone. Some loose stones as well, but not many." They walked on, into the darkness, his voice a comfort through the strange gallery around them, Aishynn describing what he saw, though it all amounted to much the same thing: a frozen forest of stone, pillars with ridges along their sides like the thick bark of detrees, and sometimes with narrowing strips of stone wrapping them like vines, tiny saplings of stone just sprouting from the ground beneath their feet, while other vast giants lay fallen and broken, their rough surfaces showing rings of dark and light. Aishynn guided her hands to feel them, making the place more real, not merely the embroidery of his words through the fabric of her imagination.

"I can hear water," she said, and they paused, listening to the soft gurgle of sound.

"Let's go that way."

She felt his shrug. "It is as good a path as any."

Hali stumbled over the occasional bone that Aishynn neglected to kick out of her way, then found her toes at the lapping edge of frigid water and gave a shiver from head to toe. "Still nothing."

"Not even a passage. The water is seeping from a crack in the wall." Aishynn's voice sounded hollow and distant. "I wanted, never mind. It's foolish."

"Tell me," she said. "It helps to hear your voice—what did you want?"

"I wanted this to be a great moment, the moment that Tsarev's death was meaningful, because I could see with his eyes, because I could lead us to the Horn at last, I wanted this madness to mean something." He moved sharply, and something splashed away into the water, a stone kicked from the shore.

"We're not through yet." She yawned broadly. "But we could use a rest and something to eat."

Aishynn cleared stray bones and rocks from the base of one of the pillars and they sat, eating in silence, then lying down, listening to the plink, plink of water dripping into the pool. "I think I can see why the Grottans talk so much. It's a very dark and empty world."

"Not when it's full of Grottans," Hali pointed out. "But I understand. It makes me miss the variety of leaves and trees, the silly turstones and the flyters."

"Even in the Crystal Sea, the sand shades from red to white to blue to gold, and, every night, the suns set across the horizon and the whole place lights up, as if the world is on fire, only to be smothered by the night sky, so full of stars there seem as many as crystals in the sea."

She stared up into the darkness, picturing the image he had conjured. "No Dousani ever spoke like that."

For a moment, he merely breathed beside her. "You're right. And so are they—I'm not one of them any more. I don't know what I am. Aishynn the traitor, Aishynn the madman, the gelfling who swallowed his friend and then forgot even his name."

Her hand rested on his chest, feeling the rhythm of his breath and the hitch as he spoke his own name. "Am I any better? I played my flute for a skeksis and brought him straight to the Gathering, the one place meant to be only for us, but we can change, we don't have to be tangled in the past, Aishynn Chaiad-slayer, captain of the Darkwing, seeker of the Horn of Thunder."

He gave a single breath of humor, humoring her. "If we could only find it, that might count for something."

That, she did not answer, for that was her hope, the dream that they shared—the dream that faded with every step further into this vast and empty darkness. She, too, sank into darkness, and woke to the painful, familiar sounds of Aishynn's dawn madness. In less than an hour, they would be trapped in the void, in a cave full of roosting chaiads, and neither one able to see in the dark.

### Chapter 13 The Footsteps of Jarra-Jen

"Stupid fool," Aishynn growled beside her, slapping the ground so hard that Hali's own hand ached in sympathy. "I thought it was done, over, still here—still can't stop it or make it change, can't even control--Forgive me! How can you—how can she--? Dreamfasting an idiot." He rolled sharply away from her, the rope tugging at her waist and she eased up to sitting, letting him go to the end of the line, feeling the pull as he writhed and rumbled.

Hali took care of her own needs, finding food in her bundle and sipping the water from her jug, not sure if she could trust the water of the cave itself. She, too, had hoped this wouldn't happen. After all, they were still in the dark, weren't they? But it was not the dark that triggered his madness. She chewed slowly. He said the stars were lost to him, and she took it as poetry, a symbol of his ruptured life. It could be the rising and setting of the suns themselves that drove him toward the fragments of the severed soul, as if the shreds of that horror bound him, even as the skeksis had suggested, ever closer to his precious stars. Still just poetry, but it might explain this, this raving even in the darkness of the belly of Thra. How had Jarra-Jen found his way here? He wasn't a Grottan, he was a Woodlander. If he had found his way here. If they weren't just following dreams, grasping at shadows in a desperate attempt to redeem themselves.

Her whole life, since the day she first played for the skeksis, seemed woven of light and shadows—the stunning brightness of the Crystal Sea, the devouring darkness of this accursed cave. She longed for the dertrees of home, to be soaring with a flock of flyters between the sky and the stone. Jarra-Jen might have felt the same, on his journey homeward from the tyrant's palace, the Horn of Thunder hanging by his side, the stars above him seeming to echo his tale.

Hali gazed up at the distant, unseeable roof with its clusters of chaiads tucking in for their daily rest, then squinted. It seemed not as distant and unknown as before, as if light seeped in from someplace. As she looked back toward what she guessed to be the entrance, she thought she could make out the shifting, dangling bodies of the sleeping chaiads. But that's not where the light came from. She turned about in a slow circle, stepping away from the pool, staring up, imagining she could see stars, tiny points of light in a familiar shape. Her eyes flared wide. There, above them in the darkness, the patterned stars of the Horn of Thunder. "Aishynn! It's here, look at the stars!"

She felt a tug on the rope at her waist and a shuffling came toward her, then his hands found her, trembling. Hali startled in wonder. "You're shaking—what's the matter?" Taking his hand, she kept him close, his head resting on her shoulder. "Look up," she said again, gesturing into the darkness, and, in an instant, realizing the problem. In order to make himself understood, he would have to speak. Did he still hear skekTek's rough voice echoing in his skull, urging him to use his voice, or feel the strength of that clawed hand gripping his jaw, forcing him back into silence? She touched his face, his cheek, the rough scar of the monster's claw.

"Take courage, I can see the Horn."

"I will try," he whispered, barely a breath enough to stir her hair. "Where is it?"

"Above us. I should have known, when you told me the cavern is like a frozen forest, tree trunks of stone. Jarra-Jen was a Woodlander, if he needed a place of safety, he'd climb."

He lifted his head, but kept her hand. "And we?"

"We'll have to climb, too, when we find the right tree." They shuffled into the darkness, her hand outstretched before them to ward off stones, glancing up to see the soft glow of those distant points of light. More than once, she cracked her toes or knees against a half-grown pillar and fell, crying out, sometimes dragging Aishynn with her—but only at first. He seemed to find his balance, as he had on the boat, leaning back against her weight to keep them both on their feet. Still, bruised and aching, bleeding a little, they moved slowly through the darkness, threading the path until the pattern of the Horn shone directly overhead.

"Not stars," he murmured.

"I don't know what they are. Let's find out." She spoke with a determination she did not feel, and his hand squeezed hers, as if he knew all about that. Hali's questing hand before her found stone, damp, slick and cool beneath her touch. "There's a pillar." She kept her hand on it, circling slowly, until her fingers slid into broad furrow, a cleft in the stone easily big enough to swallow her. It spiraled up overhead, with ledges carved at intervals, tall steps, but steps nonetheless, a steep and narrow path leading upward. "Do you feel this?"

"We'll need both hands."

"Let's keep the rope on, though. Stay close."

Hali edged into the furrow and began to climb, her hands reaching up before her to find their grip, her feet nudging into each step, the rope tugging or dragging as Aishynn followed, ever higher into the darkness. The channel turned in twisting undulations along the column, sometimes concealing the pattern of the Horn, revealing it again, a little bigger than before. Occasionally, they stopped to rest, leaning against the stone.

"Rather glad of the dark," Aishynn whispered, close to her ear.

"Truly? Why?"

"Heights." He gave a shudder, still finding ways to communicate without his voice.

As Hali set out again, she remembered trees and ledges, leaping from them, circling through the air, the river a tiny thread below. Heights. "Did you never climb the mast on one of those sandships?"

"Not unless I had to."

She pictured climbing to the top of the sail, clinging to the spindle of bone, the boat racing, carrying her swiftly over the gleaming sand, the wind in her hair, and stroking along her wings. "I'd like to try it some time." Then she remembered ordering the harbormaster of the Dousani into an execution pit, and hoped he and the others hadn't stood there too long before the mists wore off and they clambered up the rope to freedom.

Her head rapped hard against stone, and she cried out, grabbing the edge of the channel as she swayed.

"What is it?" Aishynn asked, steadying her back, his voice suddenly strong and urgent.

"I hit my head. The ceiling is low, and there's no more steps. Give me a moment." Recovering from the shock, Hali reached both hands before her, groping about, and found a hollow in the column. She bent and patted around finding nothing on the floor nor any end to the opening. "It feels like a tunnel. Narrow, but I think we'll make it." As long as it narrowed no further, closing off ahead of them, leaving them stuck in a hollow of stone like the tombs of the ancients. Stifling her fear, Hali crept inside.

In places, the stone brushed against her wings, and she pulled them in as tight as she could, pushing her bundle of supplies ahead of her. Their breathing reverberated in the cramped space, moisture slicking the floor and hanging heavy in the air. When the tunnel opened suddenly into a gloomy light, Hali gasped, the dull illumination seeming to her as bright as the Rosy Sun, rising up in the morning and setting aglow the stone all around her. She gazed into a chamber smaller than a Podling village, bigger than a gelfling house, and studded all around with crystal clusters, glowing faintly. Eager now, Hali scrambled forward, a fringe of crystals dangling against her forehead, tinkling faintly as they emerged into the chamber. Two other tunnels lead out, one large and crooked, one smaller, both edged with crystals on long, complicated nets of cord. As they entered, these other crystals chimed as well, swaying in the slight breeze as their presence disturbed the still air, and a few of the threads, thin with age, frayed into nothing, letting their crystals clatter to the ground. A pillar of stone stood at one end of the chamber, with glowing crystals set in patterns around it, the familiar patterns of Jarra-Jen and the Horn of Thunder, and there, upon the pillar, something gleamed dully in the faint light.

They hurried forward across the floor, fetching up with their palms against the edges of the stone. On the smoothed circle of rock with its bands of light and darkness lay the Horn, an instrument just the size for gelfling hands, but long and graceful, curved from a narrow end with a golden ring, up to a broad bell studded with smooth stones. Each end had a metal ring affixed to a circle that bounded the Horn itself, but the cloth or leather shoulder strap that once joined them moldered to a thin arc of rot in between.

"You," said Aishynn softly, then with his hands, dark and barely visible against the shadowy space, *You are the musician.*

She wondered if his hands had been moving the whole time he spoke aloud in the dark, a habit of body as much as of mind.

Reverently, she reached out and touched the ancient metal, then lifted its weight, her hand fitting perfectly as if to raise it to her lips and blow, to call down thunder, to command her listeners to obey. Against the skeksis, such an instrument was vital, for the sake of Tsarev and Aishynn and all the others they had hurt and killed and enslaved. Yet she found herself thinking of the harbormaster and his assistants, their will stolen, their gazes vacant and expressions slack, how they docilely jumped into an execution pit. They judged Aishynn, without knowing him, surely they had earned that small retribution? But they, too, had been wronged, wounded, a sandship that was the home of entire families destroyed, Dousani sailors injured in the wreck and again in trying to subdue their mad navigator. Hali gripped the Horn against her chest, and wondered at what provocation she would use it, if ever. "I'll carry it. I don't know that either of us will be the one to sound it. If anyone does."

A tiny slip of sound made Hali spin about, yanking Aishynn with her as a spear shaft flicked through the gloom just over the pillar where they had been standing a moment before. The spear hissed by and struck a spark from the far wall, clattering to the ground. Dark forms crowded the doors, spear points glistening.

## Chapter 14 A Tale in Two Voices

"For many lives of gelflings, this chamber has stood silent, forgotten near by all—and so it shall be silent again. No one will sound the Horn, for such was Jarra-Jen's decree," said a gelfling woman, her hand the only one empty—her spear thrown—as she stepped forward from the largest arch, her skin pale, loose and old, her eyes huge and black, her wings as dark and narrow as knives.

Hali's stomach clenched, but she did not let go of the Horn. "Jarra-Jen didn't destroy it, or bury it or cast it in the sea. He might have done any thing to be rid of it forever. Instead, he left us his story in the stars, in case we needed it again."

"You? What need have you, Scrapwings?"

The insult stung, but Hali gritted her teeth and went on, "We came not for ourselves, mistress, but for all gelflings, to stand up to the skeksis and defeat them, if we can."

The woman gathered herself and made a leap, landing lightly just in front of Hali, forcing them back against the pillar, her huge eyes sweeping over Hali's face and figure. "Why? Why bother? We are happy as we are, safe as we are, in our deep, dark homes with our little crystal warnings." Her body moved side to side as she spoke, as if marking rhythm.

"Is that why you haven't come to the Gathering?"

"You are awfully bold, Scrapwings." The woman's face pushed close to hers. "So the Gathering sent you? The other messenger said nothing of this, never asked, never even asked why we hadn't come. They think we're stupid, living in caves, never coming to the light. Until they wish to make a war, and we are safe, while they are not."

"You aren't safe even here, you won't be, when the skeksis arrive."

The matriarch made a hard sound of derision, shifting away again to study Aishynn, whose eyes lowered, his glance flicking to Hali uncertainly. "They already have, to ask our counsel, to speak with our elders. They know the value of what we keep. They know the value of secrets." She shot out a hand and snatched the Horn from Hali's startled hands. "They know we can keep one."

Hali lunged after the Horn, but the matriarch flitted backward over the crystals in the floor, raising the Horn to the deafening cheer of her clanmates. She spun about, her skirt flaring around her legs.

"As can they," Hali shouted above the din. "Secrets that would make you hate them."

Again, the woman made that sound. "We even sent an emissary, a Grottan to make his home among them. He has found them most accommodating, even to our ways. Other gelflings do little to make us feel welcome, but the skeksis turn one chamber of their palace dark, letting him work by night, appreciating him."

Hali's heart felt still, Aishynn going cold as stone beside her, his hands moved restlessly, beginning to form words, faltering and falling still again. Giving his arm a soft squeeze, Hali asked, "When was the last time you heard from your emissary?"

For a moment, the wide eyes narrowed, then the woman, cradling the Horn in one arm, still swaying, said, "What does the Gathering want from us? We are not coming, we need not be a party to the war of Spritons and Woodlanders—if they will stop fighting each other long enough to make war upon any other." She waved a hand at Aishynn, "Even if they draw in the Dousani to their foolishness. And they may not have the Horn—perhaps that is why they did not ask, but merely sent you to steal it, to sneak beneath our gates and slither up the narrow stair."

Hali weighed her answer, and finally chose the truth. "The Gathering doesn't know we are here. They didn't send us."

The woman stilled her movement. "Another boldness—why speak such a dangerous truth? But why would you speak such a foolish lie, and so it must be the truth. Yet you claim you did not come here for yourselves. Your tale is ragged as your wings."

Hali's chin thrust up, but before she could answer, Aishynn stepped up, a little before her, hands spread to stop the words. He executed a graceful, elaborate bow, his hands carving circles of respect as they stretched before him. This done, he used one hand in a slow movement that cleared the air before him, gathering those words into his fist, then said, carefully and distinctly, *Honored one, Hali speaks to cover my silence, to give me time to find a way to tell the story, as it should be told. I beg of you, tatter her wings no further.* These last words were formed with a cold precision, each movement deliberate and pointed, lacking his night-self's passion, but still revealing his anger on her behalf.

She stilled her own hurt long enough to recognize the title he gave this nasty woman, and to see that it must be true.

The matriarch spread her wings, small and sharp though they were, and stood for the first time in the stance of her power. "This one speaks well, and knows how to show respect. We shall listen."

*May we beg the comfort of your home, honored one? It is many days we have been travelling, and we seek safe harbor.*

At that, she softened, shifting back and giving a whistle that parted the warriors at the great arch. "For a child of the suns, you do speak well. I am longing now, to hear your story, but I grant your request. Come, we shall dine and make way for the tale."

Aishynn's eloquent hands hovered in the air, then he asked, *Honored one, do you know, how long until sunset?*

"We're not in the Crystal Sea now, sailor." She laughed, a booming sound that reverberated from the stones and set the crystal nets to swinging. "What need have we for sunset? Come, come." Tucking the Horn beneath her arm, she drew a long knife and severed the rope between Aishynn and Hali, gesturing for him to join her at the head of the procession, abandoning Hali to take up the rope and hurry after lest she lose him in the press of the Grottan warriors. All of the Grottan had the pale skin and large eyes of their cave-dwelling nature, but, perhaps because of the matriarch's insult, Hali found herself glancing at the wings of the women. Uniformly small and often poorly formed, their wings hunched high upon their backs, narrow and unlikely to support them even in a short glide. Much as she pitied herself for the state of her own wings, Hali couldn't help but feel sorry for these maidens who had never known the wonder of flight.

They jostled down a long corridor, sloping up and curving back, higher into the mountain. The moist air coalesced and clung to her limbs, an oppressive humidity, good

for the dense crop of mushrooms sprouting in side halls and neglected corners, but unpleasantly slimy against her skin. Dimly glowing crystals lit the tunnels, barely enough for her to see where she was going, so she stumbled often, while the Grottans around her showed no sign of noticing. It made her think of Tsarev, his essence draining into Aishynn's body, and what the Grottan would do when they found out the truth. She knew that Aishynn bargained for the chance to take back the Horn and bring it to the Gathering, but hated knowing it might be at the cost of his own life.

Chatter grew around her, the Grottans talking among themselves, telling what they had seen, how they first knew the Horn was in their own caverns, speculating about the skeksis and their influence, wondering if the strangers had brought word from Tsarev, who should really have come home for the Spore Festival. These mentions brought a sick dread to Hali's spirit, so when they came at last to a great chamber arrayed with patterns of dull crystals, and were offered towels to wipe off the damp of the caves, her hands trembled as she accepted the thick cloth.

The Grottans set off around her in a flurry of motion and talk, preparing a meal suitable for the story about to occur. They worried over what to serve, not knowing what the story might be. Should it be the tangy flavors of adventure, or the complex layering of subtle mushrooms more suitable to tragedy? Given the Woodland girl's wings, perhaps the latter? But then, the very curiosity of this pair travelling together deserved something richer, a sauce of deyeroots, or even the crispy surprise of dried marooli, their legs like the memory of masts or branches.

Hali, surprised at first not to be guarded, but to be left without escort at all, looked around the room and saw dozens of darker patches that indicated tunnels, doors and

arches. No need to watch a prisoner who had no idea how to escape. Not that she would go without the Horn, or worse, without Aishynn. She craned her neck, peering about, and found him still in the company of the matriarch, seated on a long, low bench padded with something soft which, as she drew closer, she thought was the fur of chaidads. Many of the pouches carried by the Grottans and the nets they used to transport their mushrooms, roots and insects were made from chaidad wings. Hali shivered, her chest aching.

At the corner of her eye, she caught Aishynn's gesture, calling her closer, inviting her to sit by him. She sank into the softness, the steady, constant rhythm of Grottan voices lulling her to sleep.

When the spice of food awoke her, Hali rubbed her eyes and found that low tables had been placed along their bench, stacked with food carried in by eager servers. Each stopped in front of the matriarch and gave a description of the dish. No dish arrived without its story, no food without its history, some referring to stories Hali had not heard since she was a child, some she'd never heard of before, some which attempted to capture the journey of Hali and Aishynn themselves: a puree of goldstone mushrooms, resembling the Crystal Sea, and set with marooli as if they were sandships; stretched and formed pith from the gaiax, in honor of the Woodland trees, the home of Jarra-Jen and of their visitor; a mince of six kinds of mushrooms to suggest the Gathering, where the Grottans disdained to appear; a bowl of rich, dark broth, topped with tiny, floating, glowing mushrooms, the broth so thick that the mushroom caps remained as they were placed, in the pattern of the Horn, which the matriarch still held at her side.

The rest of the Grottans settled expectantly on stumps of stone that spread around into the darkness, and the matriarch rose, spreading her short wings, to say, "We in the

heart of Thra give thanks for the bounty of stone." Together, with one voice, the Grottans shouted their answer, and Hali gasped to hear Aishynn's voice among them, soft, but clear, "Heart of Thra!" then all sat down to eat.

The food was strange, often delicious—aside from the pith of the gaiax which clung to her teeth and had to be scrubbed away by an extra helping of marooli. Aishynn ate sparingly, slowing before anyone else, absently rubbing his scar, shaking his head, and Hali touched his arm. "When can you tell the story? It must be nearly dusk."

He reeled with a gesture of denial, glancing upward as if he could see the sky. *Not until the second blessing.* His head ducked, teeth clicking together to contain the madness growing within him.

"Ask her if you can start early—she doesn't like me."

*She envies your wings,* he answered, then turned to get the matriarch's attention, leaving Hali startled at the thought.

The matriarch's body swayed, her eyes widening, and Hali feared for a moment that the request to speak before the blessing was, in fact, a dire insult. What did these people do if angered? They moved quickly, with their spears and knives, and, if Aishynn's translated martial skill was anything to judge by, they were efficient warriors. Only her acute hearing made her turn when they were found in the chamber of the Horn. With all the babble in this meeting hall, she'd never hear an attack before it was too late.

The matriarch rose. "Our guest asks leave to tell his tale. He feels unwell and must speak before his illness overtakes him. Indeed, this will make it easier upon our cooks, who cannot know what to serve for a final course until they know how his tale shall end. For those who do not know the speech of the Dousani, I will translate."

Aishynn wiped his hands again on the towel and began. *I, too, was made an emissary to the skeksis. We were told that skekTek, their scientist, studied the lore and the use of crystals, such as those at the heart of every sandship. This request came with great honor, with gifts of tools and metals, a sort hard for us to make, and so I was chosen to go to the castle, to share what we knew, and to learn what I might.*

*I found there another gelfling, keen of mind, quick of hand, dark of eye, quick to laugh or to anger, slow to become my friend—but steadfast when he did so. Aishynn hesitated, jaw clenched, eye twitching. He rubbed at his temples and took a sharp breath before mastering himself. Dark of eye, he repeated, a Grottan like you, and his name was Tsarev.*

At this, his audience cheered, a sound that echoed and thundered all around, Aishynn cringing from the noise, hurrying on almost too fast for the matriarch, trying to outrace the night. *Tsarev worked by night, and I by day. When we met, we spoke of what we learned, shared ideas, thought of things to ask our master, the scientist. He was not cruel, but neither was he kind. A hard teacher, an eager student. We enjoyed the service and we struggled with it, and we did talk sometimes of going home.*

"Heart of Thra!" shouted one voice, echoed by a dozen more, and Aishynn lurched to his feet, pushing the table away, with a sharp gesture that begged for silence. He stood before them, the expressions of his dark face nearly lost in the gloom, his hands working quickly.

*skekTek wished us to stay, telling us that he had a project, a special plan requiring us both, that he would reveal it soon and give us our parts.*

Most of what he said, Hali recognized from the memory they shared during Dreamfasting—this was the essence of what they had learned, and her presence there, her sharing it with him, made the moment clear within his mind and heart.

*At last, he said I had earned a reward, the reward for my study. Tsarev, I had not seen that morning, nor the previous night. Tsarev had already been given his reward, the master told me, and now it was my turn. He offered me a drink. His hands faltered, fingers stumbling, and repeated the words, muttering to himself.*

From her place on the fur-lined bench, the matriarch frowned down at him, her wings arching.

*A drink, he said again, a vivid, bright liquid, almost with a life of its own. His eyes gleamed, as if he looked back into that memory, his face lit by the glow of another's soul. I did not want to drink it. "No!" he shouted suddenly and shook himself, spinning on his heel, staggering.*

His voice continued, strained and terrified. "The master took me! He bound me to a chair, I was babbling, trying to make him stop. He forced my eyes open—"

Even as his voice broke the discipline of his body, his hands kept moving, kept speaking, as if he had not heard his own words. *I stared at it, tried to refuse it—*

Hali froze, rigid, breath caught, wondering at this new madness.

"He held back my eyelids with those terrible claws, there was a lens before me, a great crystal, a frame of brass that focused the light straight for my eyes--"

*skekTek seized me. He pushed me onto a table, pulled my mouth open and poured the drink between my lips—*

Aishynn spoke on, his hands and voice moving, but not in harmony, his eyes searching the past—staring now at the beam of dreadful light, now at the master who urged him on, showing no awareness of his audience, as if he had gone beyond them, beyond the cave, into the darkness of memory.

"—I had a knife, still, always one. I twisted and struck, but couldn't reach him before he strapped me down. Four hands, all four hands—"

*He held me down with two hands, gripping my skull, shutting my mouth so I couldn't scream. Four hands, the last hand holding a crystal lens—*

"They are so huge, so strong. The light seared my eyes, then it sucked at me. I was babbling, pleading, I could feel something torn from me—"

*I fell into darkness, drank darkness, darkness blasting through me, a terrible heat, and a taste. . . of stone and blood.*

"The vial sat nearby, filling, glowing, everything too bright, I was burning to ash—"

*--drowning in blood--*

"--and I couldn't stop—"

*I couldn't stop—*

"--couldn't stop screaming."

*Could not stop screaming.*

## Chapter 15 The Chaiads' Nest

Aishynn collapsed to his knees, rocking and sobbing, the cavern silent but for his grief, silent for perhaps the first time in the memory of gelflings.

Springing over the table, Hali dropped beside him, sliding her arm around him, but he shrieked and pushed her away, scrambling up, staggering a few feet, only to fall again to his knees as if struck, cursing and crying, flailing around him, scrambling up and rebounding from the presence of the others, fighting his memories, fighting himself. The Grottans pulled together, weaving a circle around him as he tried to knock them aside and flee. Some of them drew their weapons, but only to ward him off, to contain his madness. It was the worst she had ever seen him, here before the thousand Grottans and their matriarch, describing what had been done to Tsarev, the memory shooting through him with the coming of dusk, confessing he had swallowed one of their own.

The silence of his audience did not last for long. A few Grottans howled in grief, others shouted in anger, demanding retribution against the skeksis, some venting their fury toward Aishynn, expecting him to answer them, to tell them more, to give up the soul he had devoured.

At her bench, a little above the tumult, the matriarch rocked backward and heavily sat, her eyes enormous and black as the void of Raunip's Orb.

Crouched on the hard ground, watching Aishynn tear himself apart, the shouting of the Grottans beating at her ears, Hali gripped her hands together. Heart of Thra!

There must be some way to help him. In the cacophony of voices all around them, she could not imagine anything she could say to soothe him, and he would not suffer her touch. Hali forced her hands apart, shaking out her fingers, tapping them together as if getting ready to play, but she had no instrument.

She crept a little nearer, and settled herself more carefully, then began to sing, gently and quietly, and only for him. It was only dusk: this madness would pass and his own voice would return, if he dared again to use it. She had no songs of the Dousani—doubted they even had songs in the silent Crystal Sea—so she sang of the stars, of the glimpses she caught in the forest and the glory of their display in the desert of his home. The tune, she borrowed from her childhood, the words, she invented as she went on. Ignoring the Grottans, as if they two were the only people in an empty cave, as they so often had been so alone, she sang, not knowing the passage of time or the peace that spread around her, until he lay, tired, wakeful, once more in control of himself, gazing up at her, reaching out with a shaky hand, until their fingers barely brushed, an exchange of warmth as powerful as the shock of the suns on the Crystal Sea.

Grottans crowded all around them, forming a tight, angry, frightened ring, back just far enough that they could, if need be, strike first.

When Hali at last fell silent, her throat burning, turning her face away to cough, the matriarch shouted her people aside, and swept down through the narrow gap they made for her.

"How much of Tsarev is in there? how much of him is left?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Hali answered, hoarsely. "I think, very little. Aishynn is this way at dawn and dusk. There are things his body does, things he. . .he is now that I think he

wasn't before, but he does not have Tsarev's mind, only shreds of feelings, memories."

She fell silent again, coughing.

"So you say. But you don't really know—you aren't him."

"We've Dreamfasted," she croaked, as weak and dry now as on that first day in the desert, the first time they were meant to die, and she remembered his brave words when they entered the cavern, squaring her shoulders, flaring her patchy wings, ready, if need be, to defend him.

"Dreamfasted—with him? Heart of Thra, child, you are bold!" But her voice sounded hollow, the bravado of her words unmatched by any brightness in her gaze.

"Has he ever said how he left the castle? How did skekTek let him go?"

"I don't know. I don't think he knows, either. He—it's hard for him to relive."

"Hard for him?" said the matriarch harshly. When next she spoke, her low, anguished voice sank to a hard whisper. "He was my son, Scrapwings. Tsarev was my son."

The stone dissolved beneath Hali's knees and she felt as if she were falling, plunging forever through the darkness, wings broken, heart left someplace far behind. Her son. By reflex, she caught Aishynn's hand, and he gripped hers in return, solid and unafraid, and she realized that he already knew. From the moment the Grottans surrounded them, and he bowed before the matriarch's will as if he recognized her, he had known he had swallowed her son.

Slowly, Aishynn drew himself together, lifted his head, and finally released Hali's hand. He held his arms before him, wrists crossed as if inviting a rope. "Honored one,"

he said at last, "for any wrongs that I have done you, for any hurt that I have caused you, I place myself at your mercy."

"My mercy? Can you expect mercy?" She reared back, wings flared, the Horn strangled in one hand, a black stone blade in the other.

"I cannot. If I could, honored one, I would take that Horn and blow such a blast as would make the skeksis weep."

"Is that even possible? Have they such softness in their hearts and eyes that they could be turned to weeping?"

"I don't know." Aishynn bowed his head, holding up his crossed wrists. "If it cannot be done, honored one, then I submit myself for your most terrible justice."

The ring of Grottans, staring with their huge, dark eyes, the matriarch, frozen in her grief, poised to act upon her rage, Aishynn in the posture of greatest humility, willing to accept whatever came next, Hali watched them all, listening, convinced that even their heartbeats hung upon what happened next, and utterly unprepared for the matriarch's soft laughter.

The matriarch's wings shivered with it, a quiet stream of sad humor that flowed unbidden from her grief-turned lips. "Oh, my, Sailor. Do you know? Do you know what you have asked of me? My greatest justice. Yes, Dousani, I can see my son in you, can hear his voice echoing in yours. He is not there, your lady tells me, but for the mists that cloud your memory and the madness that takes you at the turnings of night. You seek from me, my greatest justice, the moment of my vengeance, for a thing you had no will to do, and—in spite of yourself—no strength to resist." Then she turned a circle, raising her hands to her people. "What is our greatest justice?"

"Light!" they shouted as one.

"And our deepest vengeance?"

"Banished to the light!"

With an unsteady sigh, she slid the blade back into her belt, and touched Aishynn's chin so that he lifted his eyes to meet hers. "If I punished you as one of our own, Sailor, I would cast you from the caves to the Crystal Sea, to suffer the heat of the desert's day, and be burned by the terrible suns." She allowed this idea to settle for a moment and continued, "So you see, Sailor, if I gave you our worst punishment, it would condemn you to being yourself."

Aishynn's black hair shivered with his bowed shoulders. "Punishment enough, honored one," he whispered.

"I know," she said. "I see it on your face and hear it in your voice. Such justice I cannot deliver, not to one so brave as to bring my son's death home to me. Stand up, Sailor. There is no greater punishment anyone can bring upon you than what you accept upon yourself.

"And so, I find I must give you mercy. You would see the skeksis weep? Very well, Sailor, I charge you to do your best to make it so." She held out the Horn, and Aishynn, rising before her, meeting her gaze with a fierce and solemn pride, accepted it.

"More even than this, my people, our visitors bring us proof of the skeksis treachery. The skeksis have no wish to aid us, not if they would strip the soul from one, and scour the soul of another—no! This feast will have no final course, not until we know what this tale might bring. In the meantime, pack our tents, prepare our mounts—

the night is young, and the Gathering awaits!" She raised her wings and the Grottans cheered.

Aishynn still flinched a little at the overwhelming sound, but he glanced at Hali, and she could not help but grin back in return as the Grottans swarmed around them, clearing plates, bringing them water, hurrying to follow their matriarch's command. They passed in procession, carrying dark bundles of cloth, baskets of mushrooms, the straps and buckles of some strange harness for whatever beasts they rode. Landstriders? Hali drank deeply from a jar one of the Grottans provided and hoped it would be so. Not since she was a small child had she ridden one of the tall, strangely graceful creatures of the plain. But could Landstriders move in the dark? Bishoffs, perhaps? They seemed slow and dull, not likely to bring the travelers over the Crystal Sea quickly enough to avoid being caught by the sunlight they so despised—if the sharp hooves of the bishoffs could even travel on sand.

A pair of young Grottans came and separated Aishynn and Hali, leading her to a chamber with a cool, clear waterfall for bathing, and providing her another thick towel. When she was clean, scrubbed free of the last bits of the Crystal Sea, she splashed out of the water to find a fresh set of clothes, a shorter tunic and belt, with its own little knife, and a long, full skirt such as the other Grottan women wore, all woven of a soft, warm material that seemed to resist the damp of the caves. In the dim light of the crystals, she could not make out their color, but dressed in any case, and returned to the main cavern, grateful that the Grottan girl had waited to lead her. At the fur-covered benches, she saw a tall young man, his shining black hair bound back with a silver band, his tunic and leggings stitched with fine threads that shimmered in the crystals' glow, a long blade at

each hip, clad as a Grottan warrior, with the dark skin and lean build of the Dousani sailor. Over his shoulder, he wore a tooled leather strap with the Horn of Thunder at his side. Aishynn.

His face lit when he saw her, and her own being seemed to glow as well, rushing up to him, hesitating before they might touch. "Nothing to do but wait, I guess," she said. He gave a nod and gestured toward the fur-lined bench where they sat, watching the Grottan preparations, amid the waves of their talk.

Aishynn, in spite of his night self, was oddly silent, studying the Horn on his lap, sipping his mug. At last, as if he felt her eyes upon him—and well he might after all they had been through—he said, "Is it true, what she said of you?"

"I don't understand."

"She described you as my lady." He glanced at her sidelong, dark hair hiding most of his face.

Hali reached out and stroked his hair aside. "Can you doubt it?"

The faintest smile of wonder touched his lips. "Some day, they will make stories of us, Sailor and Scrapwing, the traitor and his lady, and the Grottans will have to use all their wit to make the dishes they would serve at that feast."

"What will they serve for the final course?"

"Something sweet and rich, something hard—something. . . complicated."

Hali laughed. "Caja blossoms," she suggested. "Because they bite back."

Aishynn tipped his head in recognition. "It would be hard to tell the sweetness from the sting."

The matriarch strode up before them. "So, you are cleaned and clothed, ready for the journey?"

"Yes, honored one, as ready as may be. Will our mounts be able to carry two? I'm not sure that Hali can ride on her own."

Hali started to protest, but Aishynn gave a little shake of his head, and she frowned, the matriarch frowning as well. "You did tell me something of how Scrapwings earned her tatters. Very well, we shall find you a strong beast and you shall ride together. But hang on tight—we're already too near the dawn, and we can't afford to come back for you if something goes amiss."

"I'll watch out for her, honored one."

And suddenly, Hali did not want to protest any more and try to claim her freedom, but rather to ride where he did, together, to watch out for each other.

"Then the time has come." She turned and strode away, beckoning them to follow. "They sent a messenger to tell us the Gathering had moved, and to ask us again to join them. The new location is far across the woodlands, into the wilderness by the opposite mountains. We won't arrive tonight--we'll have to shelter for the day and continue tomorrow."

They followed a long, low corridor, but by this time, Hali's sense of direction was so confused that she couldn't say if they went deeper or higher or back in the direction they had come. As they went, she smelled a faint, damp animal odor. It grew stronger alongside a quiet chittering punctuated by the occasional sharp, high-pitched squeak. Hali froze and the Grottan behind her sidestepped to keep walking. Aishynn turned and came back to her.

"That's chaidas, isn't it? Do we have to go past them?"

"Hali," he said, taking her hand. "We have to ride them."

## Chapter 16 Aughra's Hill

They entered a low, round room with a long opening beyond which she caught a glimpse of stars, but only a glimpse. Between their passage and the mouth of the cave stood heaps of supplies, groups of Grottans, and the chittering, twitchy ranks of chaiads. The Grottans moved efficiently, packing balanced loads of gear to either side of each chaiad and mounting up using the pillars of stone that thrust from the floor. The chaiads crept toward the opening, their claws scrabbling on the ground, strong tails wagging, and gave a shriek as they dove free from the cave, their wings briefly blocking the sky as they spread them and soared away. Each time it happened, Hali flinched, remembering all too well when such wings had blotted out the sky and cost her own wings.

Aishynn lead her across the cavern, with the matriarch pointing out various things about the packs, the bundles, the dark, heavy tents that the Grottans would use as their temporary caves while at the Gathering. At last, they stopped beside a pillar with steps carved into it, and the matriarch approached the chaiad's face, stroking its hideous muzzle and letting it slurp her hands with its deft tongue. Hali shuddered. "Must we?"

"It's the fastest way," Aishynn said. "The only way, really. We must assume the skeksis know about the Gathering and will be making some move against us. We've been sheltering too long on our ships, in our caves, even in our forests, ignoring their evil. It's time to strike back." He rested his hand upon the Horn, the weapon Jarra-Jen hoped would never be used again, and something in his tone made Hali shiver. Woodlanders

guarded the Castle not because of their warlike spirit, but because of their loyalty and sense of honor. The thought of battle made her queasy, and the idea of using music as a weapon even more so.

But neither could take her mind too far from what must happen next.

"Because she is carrying two already, we're not loading baggage on this one," the matriarch said. "You'll sit here, bracing your feet in these loops, and hold on to the loops around her chest." She held up a slender bone with three holes bored into it. "Perhaps this is for you, Scrapwings, unless your sailor has remembered how to fly?"

Aishynn shook his head. "I know the chaiads can be tamed, but little else."

"Very well. You'll sound with open holes to take off, or to land. With this fingering to bear left, this to bear right, this to descend, this to ascend. Hold the note longer to make a turn sharper or a rise faster." She demonstrated the positions with quick movements of her fingers, and bade Hali to repeat the sequence a few times, then draped the string of the flute around Hali's neck. "Don't lose it. You'll hold on with one hand, play with the other. I suggest wrapping the broader strap over your thighs." She suddenly grinned. "In case she decides to dive after prey. You'd best let her get a small meal or two, nothing too filling, or it affects how she flies."

Hali shuddered, gripping the flute, more afraid of snapping it in her nervousness than of letting it go.

"If we're to shelter tonight, honored one, where will the chaiads sleep?" Aishynn asked.

"Trees, I suppose. We must at least get as far as the dertree woods."

"If we fly toward Aughra's Hill, we'll be at the arm of the mountains. From there, we could follow the mountains, and find cave to roost in by day."

The matriarch considered this advice, nodding slowly. Aishynn's two selves must be fully merging now, if he could use his navigational gift even by night to suggest a better route. "It's a wise choice. Also, it will keep us from being seen for that much longer. When I mount up, I'll take the lead." To one of her attendants, she said, "Spread the new route among the others, any who have yet to launch." Then she faced Hali again. "Time to ride, my dear." She gestured toward the pillar.

Hali climbed the short steps to stand above the chaiad, its wings folded, clawed hands gripping the stone, ears and nose quivering. A series of straps looped the creature's throat and its chest behind its wings, with the various loops and dangling attachments for riding or packing. Aishynn joined her on the narrow bit of rock, then stepped down to the second position, sliding his leg over the furry back, settling his foot into a loop on the far side and finding another on the near side, then, looking up at her. "At least you'll be flying."

With a jerky nod, Hali braced herself, stepped over and slithered a little on the soft back, startled by its warmth, by the feel of its quick heart beneath her. Her skirt spread nicely, tucking beneath the straps for a little extra warmth and security.

"Heart of Thra!" shouted the matriarch, raising her hands.

"Heart of Thra!" Aishynn answered, along with many other Grottans within hearing, but Hali managed only a weak smile as she lifted the flute to her lip, all holes open, and blew a short, high blast.

The chaiad scrambled forward to the verge of the cave and launched, shooting out its wings, with a shriek of its own, diving into the night, wind rushing past her face. Hali shrieked as well, more startled than afraid, for she suddenly remembered the smell of the tree flowers, the sound of forest insects swarming up around her as she leapt from a branch into the sky. At her back, Aishynn clung to her with one arm, the other wrapped in a leather binding, his breath for a moment stopped, then shakily expelled, his forehead resting between her wings, then lifted.

He gave a breathy chuckle. "I thought you were the one who'd be afraid."

But she shut her eyes briefly against the breeze, tears tickling her eyes from the chill or from the flight, and whispered, "I'm flying."

Her own wings shivered in response, but she kept them folded as tight as may be with their patches, ducking low over the chaiad's short, furry neck. She played again, and their mount dipped into a glide back toward the spur of the Claw Mountain where they had left their own Darkwing, then, at another note, the chaiad soared higher, flapping to gain altitude, leveling out, one of a hundred sweeping toward the Gathering. The matriarch swept by them on a smaller, darker chaiad, quickly overtaking the flock to lead their way. The Crystal Sea sparkled faintly down below, around the dark patches of islands. She pointed it out eagerly to Aishynn, but he still clung with both hands, ducking his head with a little groan of dismay. Afraid of heights, by night or day, poor thing! How did the Grottans handle it, after so long surrounded by caves? When she caught sight of riders on the other mounts, they were huddled tight, hoods drawn up, producing only the occasional tweet to offer guidance. Like the families of landstriders, the chaiads, too, clumped together, following their leaders.

Seeing this, feeling the pressure of Aishynn's hand relax a little, after a while, Hali let herself doze, trusting the straps, and, even more amazing, trusting the chaid to carry them safely through the night. She woke from time to time, seeing the dark roughness of the ground as they reached the edge of the woodlands, then the narrow ripple of the river far below.

"Go lower," Aishynn murmured.

Still afraid, was he? Hali blew the tone, holding it a long while to encourage their mount to sink down and down until she could make out the branches of the highest trees and startle flocks of drifting aranee that pulled in their fronds and dropped out of sight, much to her delight. The gradual dulling of the night showed that Aishynn had been correct—with quick flying, they would likely find a cave by dawn, but if they had gone straight out from the Grottans' cave, they would have made it only as far as the woodlands, where she alone would feel at home.

"There—Aughra's Hill." The promontory stood out from the mass of the mountain's arm stretching away to the right. "I've always meant to go there," Aishynn murmured.

"We'll have to come back, after the Gathering."

"That's where you said they were taking the skeksis who followed your music—maybe we should go there. We could test the Horn against him."

"I thought we meant to bring the Horn to the Gathering."

"We will, of course, but this way we could be sure it will work."

"Is this truly about the Horn and the skeksis, or about your longing to see the observatory?" She smiled at this sign of his mellowing madness, another point of union

between his day and night, that he so desired to see where Aughra kept her watch upon the stars.

"It's important," he said quietly, again with that slightly unsettling tone. "I know this is important."

She glanced around, finding that most of the Grottans had already made the turn to follow the mountains, but she hated to refuse him, after all that he had done for her, all that he had gone through. "We'll fly over," she said. "I'll take her down close, so you can see it, then we'll go on with the others."

"Very well. Thanks," he murmured, but his breathing had gone a bit unsteady, his weight shifting behind her, as if his madness caught up with him a little early today, when dawn was only a hint beyond the stars.

With a few tones, the chaiad dropped lower still and swung away from her companions, circling down and down, the round, knobbed mount of Aughra's observatory growing more distinct with each spiral. Spriton guards had been sent along with the skeksis, what if they spotted the chaiad and attacked? Hali considered taking them back up, but she hadn't seen any gelflings, any movement at all on the hill. Tangle vines clustered all along the way, she knew from the elders' stories, and roving packs of orange-furred creatures, small of stature, but with huge, ferocious mouths, ready to defend the place—what if the Spritons and their prisoner had been forced to turn back by the Hill's guardians? She did spot movement, back toward the river, but had to squint at it. Too large for a gelfling, too pale for a skeksis. A landstrider?

Aishynn let out a hiss, and Hali flicked her glance back to him, then down, to the observatory directly below them. A dark form lurked at the top of the path, ragged and

sharp, its movements showing the glint of crystal once in a while. A skeksis!

Unguarded—where were the Spritons?

"Aishynn—"Hali began.

"Keep flying, Hali," he urged her. "Just keep flying."

"But what—"

"They have to be stopped."

"Aishynn!" she cried, but it was too late. He had cast off the straps that held him to the chaiad, gripping the Horn so it wouldn't swing. As they dipped very low over the domed roof, Aishynn jumped off, landing lightly, sliding down the curve to drop onto the ledge. He stumbled and caught his balance as Hali banked again, lower still, and saw him scrambling down a series of steps until he stood there, the skeksis looming over him with a grating utterance, too large, too robust to be the one she had seen, and too garlanded with crystals and with signs.

He would die, right here before her, trying to gain his vengeance on the skeksis one by one.

Hali clung to the chaiad, sending it into a steep dive just in time to see him draw, not one of the long knives the Grottans gave him, but the Horn of Thunder, the weapon of the gelflings, the goal of their quest, and the hope of their redemption.

"Well done. Well done indeed," skekTek growled, then the skeksis raised a clawed hand and ushered him inside.

## Chapter 17 The Apprentice of Lies

Nausea burned Hali's throat, but she urged the chaid up, circling over the observatory, tears stinging her eyes. All of this—had it all been skekTek's plan, enacted through Aishynn, who had been made for this very moment, this purpose, using the skill of the navigator to read the sky, the night vision of the Grottan to seek the cave? How had he escaped the castle? He hadn't—his master had let him go, sent him off on a quest she only imagined was her own. She thought he had shown improvement the last few hours, combining the knowledge of his two selves, but he had only been drawing his mission to a close, keen to return to the skeksis who forged him.

The last of the Grottan force flickered by, silhouetted against the fading stars. Dawn's light would send them shortly to ground or cave to wait out the day. She must go with them, and tell them what had happened, that Aishynn's crime was more terrible than ever they knew.

But she kept her mount circling. More terrible than they knew. She dreamfasted with him—shouldn't she have known?

Even Aishynn, the madman, the traitor, the apprentice of lies, could not lie during a dreamfasting, could he? But, aside from that short, sharp vision of the stars—of the very trail they had followed to find the Horn--they dreamfasted by day, when Aishynn's Dousani nature dominated. What if she had touched him by night, by dawn or dusk when he was torn between worlds? Would she have seen a different memory? She

remembered the shuddering, awful story he told at dawn that day, his hands flying, his voice breaking as he told what had happened to him and to Tsarev. Tsarev felt himself babbling, felt himself dying. What had he said to skekTek? Could a man be half a traitor and half a hero? Could she leave him there without knowing the truth?

Hali blew her tiny flute, bidding her mount to land. It swept up to the crag behind the observatory and clung there with all of its claws and its twisting tail. She unwrapped the straps that bound her on and slithered to the stone, hanging on to the slope, then piped the note to launch. The chaiad flapped up, stared down at her for a moment, and gave a piercing cry, as if confused to be taking off without its rider—but it had to find shelter before the dawn, that much, she knew. "Go on," she told it, sorry now, to see it go.

The chaiad turned and soared away, hurrying to catch up with the rest of the flock. Hali's limbs felt a bit weak, imagining what might be said when it arrived without its riders. The best she could hope for was to be taken for dead, both of them, in their inexperience, falling to their doom.

Steadying herself, she crept as quickly as she could back down to the observatory, which stuck out on a knob in front of the mountains, covered by a dome of some sort of crystal, hazy and glowing dully pink on the side that faced the rising Rosy Sun. Tiny stones sifted down before her, and she flinched, seeing them tumble against a clump of tangle vines, but the knotted arms gave only a shiver and lay back again. The skeksis must have done something to Aughra's guardians to be allowed to pass them by. She thought of the Spriton guards and gave a shudder, imagining what might have happened to them, as well. At last, her feet landed on the ledge that surrounded the dome. The orrery sank beneath her into the hollowed heart of the stone, the dome rising up over it.

She wished Aughra were there, even with her gruff, strange ways, to defend her own place, to explain to Hali the mysteries that confronted her. Hali moved away from the rising sun lest it cast her silhouette upon the dome for all to see. For now, she must be secret. The dome curved out away from the crag and she moved with it, carefully, the rim sometimes wide enough for tangle vines or rumplebit nests, often dwindling to a narrow edge barely wide enough for her toes.

Inside the dome, voices murmured and echoed. Just beyond the doorway where skekTek greeted his apprentice, a panel of the dome stood open, slid back to allow the protrusion of a cluster of tubes, gears and crystals. The pathway below twisted around the knob and down into the forest. Something moved along it, the same thing Hali had seen before: tall, pale, bearing a staff, dragging a long tail in the dirt behind. UrSol, the strange creature that prophesied disaster—and he had been right, hadn't he, about Aishynn's dual nature being their destruction. Surely, he would help her.

But she hunched down, making herself as small as possible. She remembered, too, the tone of his voice, his harsh reply to Aishynn, justified though it now looked to be. He might help her, but he was not coming here for the sake of gelflings. She looked back to the gap beyond the door. He might help her unwittingly, whether he would or no. She waited, watching him approach, moving quietly in spite of his size. Her fingers tapped lightly together, calming her nerves.

As he approached, dawn's first light picked out details of his curious coat, and she noticed that curving pattern she had seen on the spiral prophecy, the one that combined with the glyph of spikes. It seemed he wore a prophecy of his own and she wondered what it meant.

When he came so far as the ledge and passed beneath the broad slab of stone that marked the door, Hali ran, lightly and breathlessly, to the edge of the opening and glanced in. Beneath her, the vast orrery swung in its ponderous motion, gleaming in the light of a dozen crystal lanterns and the rising glow of the first sun. On the great device, three suns circled restlessly, with a dozen smaller spheres, arcs of metal and points of light. All around the orrery hung a circuit of crystal shards, jiggling in the slight breeze of its passing, clearly new and quickly hung. In the shadows opposite, she saw two skeksis, huge and dark, towering over the slight gelfling figure between them. All looking this way. Hali shrank down, trembling. Two of them!

Then the urRu toned a greeting, soft but strong, and Hali took her chance, darting inside, leaping the threshold and dropping down behind the array of tubes onto one of the arches supporting the base of the dome, one hand clutching a metal tube.

With a hiss and a shriek, the larger skeksis bounded forward, drawing a great sword. "You! Foul thing—what do you here?"

"Peace, Brother, peace," crooned the other skeksis, patting the air with its clawed hands, twisting its beaky face into something like a smile. "Let us welcome our guest."

"Let us welcome him as we have welcomed others," snarled skekTek, with a sweep of his sword. In an alcove, a group of Spritons lay, some clearly injured, all of them bound, with Alandra herself dangling by her wrists from a pillar, glaring, but silent, all of her ferocity bent upon Aishynn.

The traitor stood gazing up at the gap in the dome, staring at the stars, staring straight at her. For an instant, their eyes met, his lips parted, his hands moved, but only a little, then he glanced away. "Master—"

Here it came. Here was his chance to betray her.

"Hush. We must deal with this before we return to our plan." skekTek waved away Aishynn's voice.

"A plan," urSol mused, shuffling a little forward, not quite matching skekTek's height, nor his fury. "A spiral that binds the stars to the earth, and all the souls between."

"It doesn't concern you," skekTek spat.

The second skeksis, Hali's skeksis, she realized from the sound of his voice, said, "We are never so separate as one might wish, Brother."

"One might wish to be separate forever!" skekTek shrieked. "There was no such power when we were joined. When did we have such strength, such insight, such visions as now? Why should we ever wish to reunite with such weak, unworthy things?"

The urRu reared up, its pale hair ruffling back from its deep-set eyes. "Why, indeed? You speak as if I should wish to take into myself, one of you. If any here might be unworthy, it is that—he swung his staff, pointing at the other skeksis—"I have not forgotten it was your weakness that held us all here, far from our home."

"Our weakness," murmured the aggrieved skeksis. "You were a part of me, then."

"I have cast the patterns, skekSil. I am sure it was your weakness alone, your longing for the songs of home, that turned your heart from the way. You retained the flaw, and I, the voice."

She listened, trying to make sense of what she heard. Cast the patterns, but the urRu himself admitted he was not good at them. At some time, these creatures, the urRu, were a part of the skeksis? They were united, somehow, and it was skekSil's weakness for music that had torn them apart; the urRu had mentioned that idea before,

blaming skekSil for their fallen state, but not mentioning that they were connected. Such a connection made no sense, yet they all seemed to believe it—skekTek, to refuse reunion, urSol, to disdain it, skekSil, to mourn the past with a hideous longing that echoed still in his creaking throat.

skekTek produced a rumbling purr, relaxing his stance, resting his blade flat upon his shoulder, his lower hands tucked at his broad, crystal-lined belt. "Mmm. Interesting. Can it be we are, in fact, united? United in our desire to remain separate as we are?"

The urRu circled slowly, gazing up at the orrery, all around the room, his glance lighting on the captive gelflings, on silent Aishynn, flicking away again. "There is a spiral that binds us, confines us. There might be a spiral that joins us, but still has the power to keep us apart. The signs are. . . unclear."

With a raking gesture of dismissal, skekTek strode back to where Aishynn and skekSil stood. "If you have no more than magic to offer us, you can crawl back to your valley. I have science. A specific harmonic frequency, guided by crystal resonance, projected through this vast array, breaking the device that tethers the stars and the earth." He waved a hand toward the orrery.

Staff lowering, urSol spread his many hands. "Science, you claim. This device is of science, that much is true, but what you wish cannot be done. This is merely a machine. It tethers nothing. Even if you could destroy it—"

"Do you think I cannot?" He shot out a hand to grab the Horn of Thunder where it dangled at Aishynn's side. "I created it, I can ruin it just as surely, with the help of this. Will it free us from the tyranny of the stars? No, but it will prevent Aughra from

watching, from knowing when to strike against us and force us to destroy our very selves."

They spoke as if gelflings were nothing at all, did not even exist, flaunting their plans, their worries, their anger before Aishynn and the Spritons. On their great journey across the Sea and under the ground, Hali had come to believe that she and Aishynn, just like Jarra-Jen of old, could rise up and forge themselves heroes. Hearing them now, the talk of skeksis and urRu so far beyond her understanding that she could barely follow the discussion, Hali felt a growing knot of despair. Of course, they did not speak of gelflings—what could gelflings do to creatures who could make the Orrery? Who could defeat a rank of Spriton guards? Who could plot against Aughra herself and destroy her power? Tiny, lost, alone, Hali folded her arms, sinking deeper into her hiding place.

That narrow view of Aishynn, one small figure between the greatness and the horror of both skeksis and urRu only strengthened her despair.

"Try it, then," urSol suggested. "By my own voice, I can silence thunder and cause the stones to shake. If your science fails you, then my magic may yet suffice."

As he sat back, clearing the path for this destruction, his four-armed build and his smug, strange face looked more familiar—and more skeksis. She had believed he might be their friend, might aid them against the skeksis—and indeed, he was no ally of the skeksis either, but his own rejection of their darkness made him pity the gelflings. To him, the way was clear, unambiguous, clean and narrow. In rejecting the reunion, he rejected confusion, hurt and sorrow. He rejected those terrible times of dawn and dusk when you had to choose, to trust, to risk, to fail, and, somehow, to go on, rejected the very idea that he and skekSil might once have shared a heart.

skekTek laughed, a harsh screeching that rebounded from the dome, brought groans from the captive gelflings and made the urRu draw back his head in disgust. SkekTek crowed his exultation. "I see now why you came—you would have done the same! Your patterns have reached the same conclusion as my science: They will plot against us, we know not how, but without this instrument to track the stars, they know not when. You came here to destroy the orrery yourself!" He cackled into a sinister silence, the urRu merely regarding him sternly.

"I should have liked to do this myself, but the Horn requires lips." skekTek gave a lurid grin, revealing the sharp teeth in his jagged beak. "And this particular science required much forethought. Show them your face, boy."

After a moment's hesitation, Aishynn turned revealing his scarred cheek, his eyes flashing.

"Here—"skekTek stroked a claw almost tenderly down Aishynn's cheek—"I embedded a crystal, part of the same that is strung now about the orrery. The boy's own body will resonate with the instrument and focus its power."

Aishynn's eyes grew wide, his fingers tracing the same path along his scar, his body trembling as if he already contained such terrible power. Aishynn's skin looked pale and damp, as it always did at dawn. Would his madness break the hold that skekTek had upon him? Or was it deeper than his skin, sinking down with the essence he swallowed and blackening his heart?

"It was the gelflings' own science that made me think of it, the crude crystals at the heart of their ships. This crystal's strength over distance is minimal, making it rather

hard to provide solid guidance in the same way that their bone ships are driven over the sea, but it is clear from his presence here, with the Horn that my work has been justified."

skekSil gave a short bark, drawing their eyes to him. "Forgive me, Brother. I merely notice you speak as if it were a pure success, yet your creation has been beyond your power for days. Even you cannot say what he has done when he was apart from you. Even you cannot be certain you have defeated him."

The scientist narrowed his eyes at skekSil and gave long hiss, flicking his tongue at the other. "What do you know of anything? I had to come here and fight off the creatures, when you were their captive, doing nothing at all. Without me, you'd be captive still."

"I am he who knows gelflings, yes, years now I have studied them. They are small, yes, but not without skills, not without talents."

skekTek let out an exasperated rattle. "You speak as if you admire them. Until you have drunk their essence, you know nothing of their value. When we are freed of even the possibility of reunion with them—"he thrust his claw at urSol—"you will see the strength of what I have done. Then, your gratitude will overflow."

Growling at the other skeksis one last time, skekTek swiveled his head down to stare at Aishynn, plucking a framed crystal from the many on his belt—the same crystal he used to stare into Aishynn's terrified eyes on the day he forced him to swallow Tsarev's essence and twisted him into a weapon.

"The Horn, boy."

The crystal flashed a sickly light over Aishynn's face, focusing the feeble light of dawn. With one deep breath, Aishynn lifted the Horn.

## Chapter 18 To Silence Thunder

At the demanding wriggle of skekTek's claws, Aishynn lifted the Horn up to slide the strap off over his head. The skeksis took it lightly between those claws and examined it, nodding and making that rumbling, nauseating purr.

"Your brother is right, Master," Aishynn said, his hands moving.

"Hmm?" Both skeksis stared at him.

"I have been a ship without a heart, nobody knew where I might go, what I might do." Aishynn's hands moved, shaky as ever in that space before day, but his words stilled Hali's breath. *Only you, Hali, my guiding star.* "Nobody but you."

He had seen her, and kept silent, speaking now to her alone, asking for her faith. In that instant, her heart pulsed with the knowledge, even as her blood chilled with fear. She cursed herself for doubting him—but what next? What could they possibly do?

With a satisfied rumble, skekTek thrust the Horn back into Aishynn's hands.

"Blow, boy. Take down what I have made."

Aishynn wrapped the Horn with one hand, the other clenched into a fist, then waving softly, a single word, a silent plea: *fly, fly, fly.*

She did not know if she could—but she had to try. As he raised the Horn to his lips, Hali sprang from her hiding place and leapt into the room, unfurling her wings, crying out at the pain that stretched from stiff muscles and barely-healed bone. The wind

slapped at her as she rushed toward the ground, but she twisted, soared, and snatched the Horn from Aishynn's grip, her wing slapping skekTek as she passed.

Clutching the Horn, Hali ducked beneath the stony roof beyond them, crashing into an elaborate device and tumbling to a halt.

Desperate, she searched the gloom, spotted a low table and rolled beneath, holding her breath, hoping they could not hear her thundering heart.

Above, the skeksis howled. A mirror from the fallen device stuck up at an angle, showing the terrible scene, the urRu giving a tone of callous mirth, skekSil trying to soothe the scientist and moving in half-steps toward where she had fallen.

"I shall find it, Brother, have no doubt. She shall not be hidden for long," then, in a lower voice, "unless she is of the Vapra clan, and a master of concealment, yes, then, perhaps, a long search."

Still howling, skekTek swiped at Aishynn, but the gelfling twisted away, slipping his grasp. "Where did she come from?" Aishynn shouted. "What happened?"

"You dare claim ignorance! You scrap of hide. After all of the knowledge I have wasted upon you." He reached down and drew his sword with a long scraping of metal, a blade nearly as long as Aishynn was tall.

"Master, wait!" Aishynn retreated, drawing near to where the other gelflings lay, his hands up to forestall the skeksis' approach. "I know who rules here. I know who holds the power. Give me a chance to prove my loyalty."

"Where is my crystal, boy?" skekTek stretched down his thick, dark neck to stare into Aishynn's eyes. A trickle of blood stained his cheek, just where the scar had been, and his fingers dripped blood onto the star-marked floor.

"You don't need it, Master," Aishynn said. His body twitched and shivered, and she could tell he held back his madness only with the greatest effort. "Watch. Let me prove my loyalty." He stretched one hand toward Alandra where she hung, teeth bared.

"Traitor," she hissed. "You might kill me, but you cannot slay our spirit."

With his other hand, Aishynn slowly drew one of the long knives, blade and bloody finger both pointing toward her. "When the gelflings grow to trust me again, Master, think how useful I could be."

The skeksis fingered his blade with one of his hands, turning his framed crystal with the other so that it caught the first rays of dawn. "Perhaps not that one. Imagine what you could be with a Spriton's essence." His eyes flared with delight.

"I ask only one thing, Master." Aishynn retreated another step closer to where Alandra hung, close enough that she spit on him. "You'll never again harm my people."

"Your people? Do you even know what that means any more?"

"Of course I do." Then he grinned, sharp and radiant. "I'm a gelfling."

With the speed of a Grottan and the precision of a Dousani, Aishynn spun and sliced the rope at Alandra's wrists and flipped the knife, sliding the hilt into her grasp. "Free your soldiers!"

"No, you—I am the warrior here." Alandra gave a single hard beat of her wings and pushed off the ground, swinging her blade in a wicked arc toward skekTek's throat.

The scientist shrieked, bringing up his sword to clang against hers.

"Mmm," said a voice very near to Hali's table, skekSil's shuffling feet and dragging tail flicking past in her view. "I do not see her."

"Forget her—help me!" shouted skekTek. "And you—urRu—sing this place to the ground if you have to. They must be stopped!"

SkekSil's sword slid from its sheath. Hali edged away from that side of the table, ready to push free and run—but where? Both skeksis stood between her and the other gelflings where Aishynn feverishly cut ropes, his mutters and curses halfway between madness and desperation.

The other direction, between her and the door and the shafts of sun that sparked upon skekTek's crystal web, the urRu stood, gazing up at the orrery as it swung through the air, marking time among the stars—time, perhaps, to a reunion between urRu and skeksis, dark and light—a time when the skeksis would be gone forever. He spread his feet, braced himself, his tail resting, his hands open, save the one that held the staff, and he sang.

It began as a tone so low she felt it through her bones pressed, as she was, to the ground. When it reached her ears, she stifled a cry, stifled the urge to clamp her hands over her ears. The orrery spun just a little faster, giving a long groan of protesting metal.

UrSol's voice grew, deeper and louder, expanding into the space around them, crushing her ears, drawing cries from the other gelflings. Hali winced and wanted to curl into herself never to emerge again.

Instead, she pushed against the floor, scrambled up and lunged from her hiding place, using the one weapon she had: Jarra-Jen's Horn of Thunder. She pressed it to her lips and blew for all gelflings, blew to stop the urRu's terrible song, blew to save the stars.

A high, clear, wonderful note sounded, echoing through the observatory and rebounding with a roll like thunder.

The urRu turned slowly, his tone faltering, shifting as he stared at her. His deep eyes bored into her, then his tone leapt suddenly skyward, the tone, the voice, that could silence thunder.

A crackling sound filled her ears, and the Horn shattered in her hand, plunging her to the floor, crying out in the void that seemed suddenly to fill her skull.

UrSol towered over her, raising his staff, fury filling his voice, distorting the sound of his power. At his back, the orrery moved onward, no longer shaking, no longer groaning, marking the stars for those who would follow—but not for her. The staff jabbed toward her chest with the strength of all four arms.

A dark blade swung low, cracking into the staff and deflecting its force into the floor by her head.

Gratitude flushed Hali's skin, but her relief fled in an instant. SkekSil loomed over her, yanking back his curving blade, rearing up for another strike, as if to kill her himself, but he hissed, beak gaping, eyes glittering, staring at urSol. "No," he screeched. "No."

UrSol swept up his staff, opened his mouth, and let out another blast of sound.

Hali clamped her arms over her ears as the orrery gave a squeal of tension, expecting to see it twisted by the force of that sound, wrenched from the rock where it stood and crushed back to the ore from which it came.

"No," said skekSil again, but he swarmed past her, faster than she'd ever seen him move, placing himself between her and the urRu, raising his blade.

UrSol's tone cut to a moan of frustration as he spun, his staff rapping the sword.

"You cannot kill me, skeksis, not without killing yourself."

"So be it," skekSil growled. "Killed if we must be--you will not bring it down."

"Brother!" cried skekTek from the midst of his own battle, "What's come over you? Are you mad or blind, or just stupid?"

"Back!" skekSil shrieked. "My voice, my heart, my home, I want it back!"

He thumped his narrow chest with a clawed fist. "There is a way, yes? A way to be one, a way to be remade, to be other than this!" He raked his claws down his chest then, and urSol cried out as streaks of blood stained his flowing garments. "To give back this accursed flesh and be made whole. To hear, to see, to sing!"

"You deserve none of it," urSol pronounced. "Not the voice to sing, nor the heart to care for the song, not the home you lost us, nor the home we're making here—you deserve none of it!" He leapt and sprang to the attack with a two-armed sweep of the staff, the quicker, the angrier, the stronger of the two by far.

"And I could have been sure you'd never have it," the urRu murmured, "but for her."

SkekSil flailed a desperate parry, twisting about, taking the blow on his back, his sword flying from his grip, but urSol slid aside, aiming his next blow at Hali.

With a cry and a scrape of his claws, the skeksis pushed forward once more, thrusting out his arms. Bone cracked as the staff landed, and skeksis and urRu howled their pain in a terrible harmony, one voice torturous and awful, the other beautiful and hard and full of darkness.

"Not your home," panted skekSil. "Not our home—theirs, hers, gelflings."

UrSol's howl of pain twisted into a cry of rage that seemed to shake the floor and walls and spinning suns. He gripped his staff in all four hands, lifting it high, one of the hands fumbling, its arm broken.

SkekSil rose up, grasping the staff as well, holding it back, its own broken arm dangling, forced downward by the urRu, struggling with all of his wiry darkness to save Hali's life. Overhead, the wavering staff snagged upon crystals with a jangling music and caught the full light of the twin suns with a glow that pierced all shadow.

UrSol bellowed his fury, his hate, his refusal to yield; skekSil wailed his need, his fear for Hali, his hope for the future. The two voices merged into one strange and wondrous song. The glowing fusion of sun and crystal spread over them, vast and brilliant.

As Hali stared, urSol's pale hair shriveled like ash, his coat of spirals rippling away, his limbs twisting with darkness as if his anger and hate infected his body from his suddenly lean and angular face to his thrashing black tail. Beneath his four hands, growing darker and more warped with every moment, four other hands clutched the staff, defending the orrery, defending her home, defending Hali herself, growing stronger, brighter, the illumination spreading down skekSil's arms, rushing over his body and face, transforming him. Where the urRu had towered in his rage, a shrieking, panicked skeksis now trembled, releasing the staff, slapping itself in dismay, jabbering from its beak full of teeth.

Where the skeksis crouched in defense, an urRu, pale and slightly glowing knelt, lowering the staff, eyes dancing, round with amazement at his transformation, remade in

the pattern of light, not yet whole, but no longer bound to darkness, as he wished and hoped and fought for. He spread his hands, raised his muzzle to the heavens, and sang.

His was a song of pure joy, rich with delight in singing, leaping with rapture at the rising day. It was a song of thanks for such a sound, a song of wonder for such a change, a song that moved Hali almost to tears to hear it, grinning and laughing, opening her hands, and rising up to listen, as once the skeksis he had been lingered near to listen to her own small song. Filling her with radiance, this new song swelled all around her, down from the sky, up from the earth, outward from the heart that grew to embrace it.

The new skeksis shrieked and fled, clawing at its own head in a vain attempt to make the music stop. Behind her, she heard the fury, the agony of skekTek, with a few staccato clashes of steel before he, too, fled the overwhelming sound, oozing dark blood from his wounds, shouting, glaring, howling—anything—but the song rolled over him and rushed him out into the brightness of day, his hideous face streaked with black unwilling tears.

## Chapter 19 Dreaming in Stone

When the urRu lowered his head and closed his mouth at last, allowing the song to echo into silence around them, Hali brushed back her hair and looked about. Not far off, Alandra and her Spritons stood amazed, some leaning on each other, some with tears streaming down their faces. The matriarch blinked a few times, finally taking her gaze from the urRu and blinking at Hali, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Hali ignored her, still searching, hearing the single sound in disharmony, a ragged gasp.

Pulling herself to her feet, stumbling past the Spritons, Hali peered into the shadowy depths of the workshop.

"Hali," her name, barely more than a breath, and she turned about to find him crouched beneath the orrery, its shadow shifting over his face. His hands moved, trembling, *It is not over, even though I tore out his crystal. Will this never end?*

She thought to help him up, but her own body ached and her wings shivered with their effort, so she joined him instead, the metal suns and stars soaring overhead. "I wish I knew. The crystal was just a sliver—Tsarev's essence is a part of you now, whether for good or ill . ." she let her words go. He knew, more than anyone, what a burden that was.

*I had to be here, to come down, when I saw skekTek—I thought to attack him, but I hesitated on the treshold. I could see the Spritons they had already defeated, and I didn't see how I could do anything. The crystal was burning my face as he tried to guide me, to get me to do what he wanted, so I did.*

"Only until you knew what to do, Aishynn. You were never his slave. He may have gripped your rudder, but he never controlled your heart."

*It was you who played the Horn and stopped them.*

"Not alone," she sighed, "but the Horn is gone, broken."

Aishynn's hands grew more confident with the coming of day. *It doesn't matter—it proved what we needed it to. That we're not without power. That even a gelfling hero could be enough.*

"Enough to defeat them? Maybe a gelfling army."

*Then that is what we need.*

"What's this about an army?" Alandra asked, coming to squat before them.

"We wanted to bring the Horn of Thunder, to use it against the skeksis, but it almost ruined everything."

"I don't believe you would have blown the horn to ruin. Neither of you," she said, aiming her direct gaze at Aishynn. "And thus, I must beg forgiveness. We acted too rashly in banishing you. You both must return to the Gathering with me—the matriarchs need to hear your story. They need to hear all of this."

*I am no less mad than ever I was.*

Alandra frowned. "I don't understand."

"He says he is still mad, by dawn and dusk in any case, but I think he's improving. He's not dangerous."

The Spriton warrior gave a crooked smile. "He is to our enemies. If he can share what he learned at the Palace, not to mention using the courage he's shown here today.

Please, come back with me. I will defend you with the strength and honor of the Spriton clan." She slapped her palm against her thigh.

A curious sound drifted to them, the new urRu testing his vocal range, soft and low, deep and warm, always full of amazement. He let his voice dwindle to a sigh at noticing their interest. "I have so very much to learn. I was full of shadow, now I am open to the light." He stroked a spiral through the air with his staff. Then he lowered his head and hands together, gazing at Hali. "Thank you for the song which awoke me. Once before, I heard a gelfling singing, a song of my own people, a song that gave me grief and anger, and turned my heart to darkness. It was a flaw which broke us, and made us as you have seen us. But there are patterns that show we can be whole again, even with our flaws."

"We need to find those patterns, too," Hali told him.

"You need to make them. And so you shall." He rose up again to his grand height, sunlight gilding his pale hair, his face aglow. "I have seen it."

It took several days travel before the gelfling party found the Gathering in its new location—all were tired, hungry and sore when they departed, and they first had to escape Aughra's guardians, which had revived to try to snare them after skekTek's flight.

In the cluster of hills that surrounded the new Gathering location, the Grottans, accepting their place among the clans, had already told what they knew of Aishynn's past and the exiles' journey. Excitement rippled through the encampment even more so at this second arrival than it had when Aishynn's ship first landed all those days ago, carrying him into Hali's life, weaving their adventures into one. The Grottan and the Spriton clans both claimed hospitality for Hali and Aishynn, but they chose instead a small tent of their

own, spread beneath a dertree at the edge of the Drencheni swamp, where Aishynn's madness could pass in solitude, or with Hali's quiet presence and soothing song. The Gathering happened now by night, for the Grottans could not abide full daylight, even here beneath the tangled trees and vines that parceled out the sky.

Hali and Aishynn stood together at the center to tell their story, their voices clear and careful, the tale of Scrapwings and Sailor revealed for the first time from beginning to end. Alandra and the Grottan matriarch stood to ask for their release from exile, each telling what she knew, what she had seen, then Tiel of the Sifa people rose as well, recounting in turn each sign from their story that showed their truth, then Shannia of the Dousani, her dark hands sweeping like chaiad wings, graceful through the firelight, to offer them water—the greatest treasure of her people--though she still flinched a little at the sound of Aishynn's voice. Hali's own matriarch, Calla of the Woodlands, welcomed her home. The cheerful Drencheni matriarch roared her approval for all of this, while the Vapra matriarch rose solemn and beautiful to offer her own welcome.

Rian's commanding voice brought them back to the Gathering. "In saving the orrery, a battle has been won, but the war remains ahead of us. We are at last united, and now we can find our way forward, together."

The gelflings shouted and cheered, the Dousani raising their hands to wave them in approval, even as they withdrew from all the noise, while the Grottans chanted "Heart of Thra!"

"Honored ones," Hali said, pitching her voice as a song of invocation, and the crowd hushed to hear her. "We have been divided by too many things, but foremost among them is ignorance. We have not listened, we have not heard, we have not tried to

understand. The urRu called us those who don't know the future—but it's time for us to know."

"That is a thing for the urRu, and for the skeksis—more's the pity," said Calla.

"We are gelflings, how can we do as they do?"

Hali shook her head. "We need to search ourselves, honored one, to find what we have, what we can do. If we learned nothing more from Jarra-Jen's tale it should be that. The gifts he is given to conquer, he earns not by trying to be something else, but by revealing himself."

"Dreamfasting. That's a strength we have that no other—not even Aughra—can claim," Aishynn offered. "Here, now, beneath the stars. Together."

The ranks of keen eyes watched them, whispers spreading, then one of the Grottan said, softly but distinctly, "Heart of Thra."

"Seven gelflings each for the seven clans," Tiel proposed, and the matriarchs raised their wings in agreement. "Let the hill be cleared, the fires lit, and let each of us chose from young and old, from women and men."

The matriarchs lowered their wings and moved among their people, making their choices, but Calla lingered, studying Hali and Aishynn.

"This is a thing we've never done before. We will need guidance, strong hands and strong hearts to lead us into this void. Hali, of the Woodlands, will you play for us, to help us travel there?" From the draped shawls at her waist, Calla produced a beautiful flute, smooth and perfectly formed.

Hali caught her breath, then nodded once, hardly daring touch the instrument, and, once she held it, hoping she never had to give it up.

Then Calla turned to Aishynn. "And you, Aishynn the navigator, no longer traitor, but rarely mad—will you steer our pathway to the stars that show our future?"

"I will."

"You're the queen, aren't you?" Hali whispered, but Calla merely smiled, with a tiny motion of her hand, a Dousani gesture for silence, then she turned to make her own choices.

Gradually, the other gelflings moved away, leaving the small hilltop bare—after they had herded away the turstones and a few other creatures sheltering there. With Spriton precision, seven firepits were built at seven points around the hilltop, then each clan stepped forward in turn to light their own hearth. The Spritons lit their fire with a spark struck from an old swordblade, a method Hali knew of, but had not seen.

The Dousani scraped friction from a crystal brush, onto a golden rock that flared immediately to brilliance in a basket of leaves that glowed as it burned like a net full of stars, while the Woodlanders used the familiar firedrill of a green stick wound by a handspun cord. The Grottans set their flame in the bowl of a dried mushroom, nurturing it there in the darkness until it grew large enough to escape into the branches. The Vapra drew a coal from a hidden box and blew it gently back to life among the twigs, while the Drenchen muttered and grumbled at the whole idea of lighting a fire, struck a spark into a nest of thick moss, and cheered when the dry branches of the Woodland lit so much more readily than any soggy thing of the swamp where they lived. At least the clever Spritons laid out the fire pits so the silent and reserved Dousani were a little sheltered from the loud Grottans and from the boisterous Drenchen alike.

Seven groups of gelflings moved through the firelight. Sparks flared around them, stars shone overhead. As the chosen gelflings came up, they mingled, no longer staying safe among their own clans, but looking to the others, curious, expectant, excited. When the matriarchs raised their wings for silence, Hali began to play. The queen's flute blew higher and more clear than her own broken instrument had done, and added a few lower notes as well. She played high and spritely in honor of their union here, low and solemn in token of what they must do. Her wings unfurled as she played, just a little, but she did not care, swept away as she was in the beauty of the song and of the flickering light on the faces of the gelflings drawing up around her. She played at last for the queen, and somehow felt that the queen was the least among her audience—it was for the hearts of all gelflings that she played, for the Heart of Thra they hoped to invoke and the stars above they called upon for guidance.

Each matriarch stood, hands outstretched, inviting others, and, carefully, the others came, forming seven rings around the hilltop.

Aishynn shifted his weight, glancing at Hali, but she nodded to him, still playing. "Lie back, honored ones—everyone," he said. "Lie down where you can see the stars. Join your hands and join your spirits to the dream."

They did as he bid them, arrayed around the center, gazing upward. "There, do you see the outstretched hand of Jarra-Jen? urRu make their spirals and skeksis their machines, but gelflings are no strangers to the stars."

And so, as once he guided her through the Grottan caves, as once he marked the stars in blood upon her cloak, Aishynn conjured now the tales of heroes, visions, great deeds and showed their patterns in the stars. Many things remained uncertain, claimed by

his night self, or by day, but the shrieks of skeksis and the urRu song of gratitude had pierced the shadows for this, at least: Aishynn had found his stars.

Hali's song became as the wind, Aishynn's voice the crystal, together carrying their people away from their tiny selves, out, up, to something greater. The seven rings joined their hands, joined their hearts and minds and beings, to search for the way.

All night they lay dreaming, long after Hali and Aishynn fell silent, watching the stars wheel overhead, feeling the ground tremble at their backs. Between them, they joined, for that one night, the heavens and the earth, the stars and the stone, and their dreams inscribed the future, etching it in stone, not through the science of the skeksis, nor the magic of the urRu, but in a new way, a way belonging to themselves alone, the first time the gelflings made for themselves a prophecy.

When single shines the triple sun  
What was sundered and undone  
Shall be whole, the two made one  
By gelfling hand or else by none.

The words, whispered at first, grew louder, a chant that echoed from so many voices, even the Dousani in the ecstasy of union, allowing their usually silent voices to be heard. Just as the Rosy Sun edged above the horizon, the hillside trembled and a pier of stone thundered forth from down below, shedding dirt and shaking off roots, and the sounds of Aishynn's madness were as nothing compared to the groan of Thra as She put forth this symbol, like a promise to her children, dreams made stone.

The sound of voices died away, Dousani sharing their long cloaks to ward off the sun from their Grottan companions, all of them gazing up at what their dreams had made.

"Skeksis rule shall be ended!" cried Rian, pointing to the prophecy.

Alandra stared as well, but sadly. "It's a good thing the orrery was saved, but, if I understand what I saw there, the triple sun is a long time from now. How will we survive until then?"

"As we have tonight," said Calla, matriarch of the Woodlands, queen of the gelflings, "together."

Cheers and shouted greeted this as the other gelflings returned, standing in awe of what the dreamers had done.

"Together," Hali echoed, watching the gelflings gather, joined to common cause, joined by a common dream.

Aishynn ran a finger along the healing cut on his cheek, then said, *Together?* and his eyes were for her alone.

"I need you, Aishynn. I need all of you—sunlight and stars," she told him, then smiled, and added, "silent and loud."

The suns' light found them in the shadow of the stone, in the midst of their people, Hali and Aishynn, dreaming a future of their own.

The End

### About the Author

E. C. Ambrose is the author of "The Dark Apostle" historical fantasy series about a medieval barber surgeon to start in July 2013 with *Elisha Barber* from DAW books. Library Journal's starred review described *Elisha Barber* as "painfully elegant, beautifully told." The author blogs about the intersections between history and fantasy at [ecambrose.wordpress.com](http://ecambrose.wordpress.com) and can also be found at [www.theDarkApostle.com](http://www.theDarkApostle.com) or on [facebook/ECAmbroseauthor](https://www.facebook.com/ECAmbroseauthor). Published works include "The Romance of Ruins" in *ClarksWorld*, and "Custom of the Sea," winner of the Tenebris Press Flash Fiction Contest 2012. E. C. spends too much time in a tiny office in New England with a mournful black lab lurking under the desk.