

A
DAY
OF
FALLEN
NIGHT

SAMANTHA SHANNON

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G
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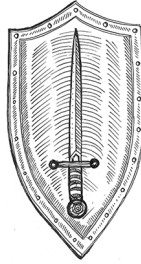
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West

The salt road cleaved to the Smoking Ridge. They rode for as long as they could by night, the air chilling as they moved farther north. By day, they slept among dark boulders or oak groves, out of sight.

Without their ichneumons to track the scent, they relied on reason. The salt road was the fastest way to Sadyrr, the way that Siyu would most likely have come. On the fourth day, they stopped for supplies and a hot meal at Svartal, where the Ments mined a rare black salt.

Mentendon had once been a mosaic of cultures and beliefs, even when its own ancient religion had been widespread. Before the Midwinter Flood, every faith in the world had earned followers here. The Six Virtues had been present for at least a century, especially in the west, where Yscali influence was strongest – but now the law enshrined their supremacy. Any other form of worship was severely punished.

In the past, the wine den at Svartal must have welcomed orchardists, mountain singers, mirrorfolk. Now there was one drunk sanctarian. Esbar eyed him over her cup of apple wine.

‘Stop staring,’ Tunuva muttered.

‘Why?’ Esbar said under her breath. ‘What do I have to fear from his dead knight?’

‘Do you want to spend time on a pyre?’

'I could always use a warding. It might be fun,' Esbar mused, 'watching him squawk as I refuse to burn.' Tunuva went to pay. 'What?'

They made camp in the foothills. Through a crack between two boulders, Tunuva watched a train of carts head north at sunrise, laden with lumber. Three riders in leather and mail, their hair oiled in a Hróthi style, barked orders at the Ments.

'Those must be salt warriors,' Tunuva said. 'Can they be taking all that wood for Hróth?'

Esbar grunted. 'Iron pine. I hear they cut all theirs down.' She turned over, bundling her cloak under her head. 'Get some rest, Tuva.'

Tunuva lay down beside her. 'What if Siyu doesn't want to come back?'

'She is coming back whether she likes it or not.'

'The Priory is not a cage.' Tunuva looked at her. 'Is it?'

'If it was, you and I would not be in this place,' Esbar said, her voice short with exhaustion. 'We are the Mother's secret. That means protecting our sisters even from themselves.'

'What if Siyu no longer wants to be a secret?'

'Perhaps none of us can do or be exactly as we please in life.' Esbar breathed out through her nose. 'If she were older, I might listen. She doesn't know what she's choosing.'

As she spoke, the ground trembled. Esbar snapped upright, wide awake. Tunuva watched the mountains. 'Perhaps we should move on,' she said. The rocks were hotter. 'Can you last?'

Even though Esbar looked weary, she nodded. They climbed back into their saddles.

Now they rode almost without stopping. It rained for the first time: cold, hard rain. Tunuva tilted back her head and relished the feel of it on her skin.

At last, on the cusp of a burnished sunset, hulking forms rose from a plain east of the road. Here the grouts of a crushed dome, and a line of pillars, all shortened like candles; there a crumbling archway, high and stern, or the face of a god whose name was forgotten. Tunuva stopped her mount to behold the Buried City.

Gulthaga. Once it had been a shining cauldron of knowledge and trade – a city of secrets, marvels and horrors, which might one day have grown into a cruel and thirsty empire. Now it lay in piles of stone, waiting for time to reduce it to dust, and then to memory.

At the same time, Tunuva and Esbar looked up in silence. Above were the terrible slopes of the Dreadmount. Eleven thousand feet of rock, armoured in black glass from the only day it was known to have erupted – the day it birthed the Nameless One.

Where the ancient Yscals had worshipped all mountains, the Ments had only feared this one. They had seen it as the lair of an earthbound god, the Smith of the World, enemy of the Smith of the Heavens. They had brought offerings to its slopes to appease him, sacrificed people to his boiling springs – though Tunuva suspected the second part was an untruth, peddled by the Vatten to justify their forced conversion of the Ments.

In fifty years, she had never seen anything that disturbed her more than the Dreadmount. Each sister came to behold it before her kindling, to remember what the Mother had defeated, and to understand the monumental heights of her courage. She had faced the vile spawn of this mountain alone.

Proof of its violence scattered the ruins – bones by the thousand, left where the heat had baked them centuries before. Crops would usually be grown in the rich soil around fire mountains, vineyards raised to make fine wines, but no one dared sow here. After all, it was arrogance that had doomed the Gulthagarians. They had taunted the mountain with their splendid city, and the Dreadmount had answered, smothering its splendour.

Tunuva looked past the tragic remains, towards a shape on the stump of a pillar. With Esbar behind, she spurred the horse off the salt road, down the incline to the skeleton of Gulthaga. As she drew close, the shape resolved into a girl, wrapped in a green cloak, staring at the mountain.

‘Yeleni Janudin,’ Esbar seethed. ‘You’ve led us on a merry chase. Get down from there.’

‘Esbar. Tuva.’ Yeleni climbed off the column, face slick with tears. ‘You came. I hoped it would be you.’

Tunuva called out, ‘Is Siyu here, too?’

‘No.’

‘You little fool.’ Esbar was already off her horse. ‘You are very fortunate that I am not yet Prioress. Were it up to me—’

‘Forgive me, sister, please.’ Yeleni buckled, heaving with sobs. ‘Siyu said I could go with them to Hróth. I wanted to see the sky lights, just once! She told me to ride all the way to Sadyrr, but then I saw the Dreadmount.’

She covered her eyes with one hand. 'I should never have forsaken the Mother. Not even to see the lights. Please, sisters, take me home.'

'You may not have one any longer,' Esbar bit out.

The girl looked terrified. 'Calm, child.' Tunuva spoke as gently as she could. 'Where is Siyu?'

Yeleni wiped her cheeks. 'They never came this way. She and Anyso told me to leave first, to lead you away. So they could wait a few days and then ride to Kumenga.'

'Then they are not going to Sadyrr.' A bitter realisation. 'Esbar, we have lost the—'

The ground shunted, so hard Yeleni lost her footing.

Dust hissed around them. The Dreadmount gave a long, hostile rumble, a sound that ground into the marrow, and smoke curled from its slopes. A flock of birds took off from the ruins. Tunuva caught her horse by the reins and held on as it huffed out a nervous snort.

A dead stillness followed. All Tunuva could hear was breath: hers, not hers. And her blood – she could have sworn that she could feel it, the hot melt of it through her veins.

She could have sworn her blood was simmering.

It happened faster than she had thought possible: the shattering, the crack of rock, the furnace that bellowed from beneath the skin of Edin. In her dreams, it had never taken a moment for the world to break, as it had five centuries before. It had always taken hours.

But in the time it took her to draw breath, stillness was turmoil. Silence was din. The ground heaved underfoot, and at last, lava came exploding from the mountain – an eruption so destructive in its force, so catastrophic, that Tunuva doubted her own eyes. Foul fumes came rushing forth with it; branches of lightning flashed. The few clouds overhead were torn away, as suddenly as if a god had snatched them to opposite sides of the sky.

The horses screamed and reared. Fighting to restrain her mount, Tunuva smelled brimstone. The stench ignited the magic within her. Her fingers burst unbidden into flame, a red flame she had never seen. Before she could absorb the shock, she had reduced the reins to char, and the horse broke loose with a squeal, eyes rolling.

Esbar had lost her horse, too, though she seemed not to care. She was gazing at the Dreadmount, her eyes reflecting chaos, holding fire. The sight unlocked Tunuva.

‘Ez,’ she said, ‘we have to move. Esbar!’

‘It’s like us.’ Esbar was rooted in place. ‘Do you sense it, Tuva?’

Tunuva sensed it.

Siden. The same magic that lit the tree, that comforted and strengthened her. There was nothing that felt the way siden did, and yet that was what she felt now from the Dreadmount, the cradle of evil. She fought a fearsome urge to walk towards the eruption – to dive into that sea of fire, drink it down like wine. She felt strong enough to do anything.

There was no time to wonder. Hot rocks and embers glittered in the sky, small as coins at this distance, and rained on to the slopes. They flickered out, only for more to fall. The slopes themselves were moving, shifting.

Another rumble shook the Dreadmount. Rubble came thundering down its sides; small chips were clattering on the ruins. Yeleni cried out as one of them nicked her cheek. Straining with the effort, Tunuva smothered the strange fire, seized Yeleni by the wrist, and thrust her into a gutted house. Not a moment too late, for a deep *boom* came next. The air scorched, more fire ignited in her palms, and she was thrown backwards, into the remnant of a column.

That shock could have killed her. If not for what they were, she knew they would already be dead. Waves of hot wind seared her eyes dry. Far away, her horse crumpled.

‘Tuva!’

She stared past Esbar, at the river of flame that stemmed from the mountain, iron smelted in the forge. Bright firefalls seeped down the slopes.

‘Yeleni,’ she managed, ‘quickly!’

The girl ran towards her. Tunuva grabbed her hand, and the three of them struck out across the plain.

Ash and rock pattered everywhere, cutting their skin. Above, day became darkest night.

Mages were swift, but the flow of molten fire was faster. This time, it would not consume Gulthaga. Instead, it was streaming down another side of the mountain, towards their way back to the Harmur Pass. Tunuva moved as she never had, pulling Yeleni behind her, wrapping herself and the girl in a warding. Overhead, a black pillar twisted towards the sky, bloated with lightning – billows climbing

billows, wide as a city, already several miles high, so thick it looked solid, yet soft as a cushion.

Sooner or later, that ash plume would collapse.

‘Tuva,’ Esbar called, hoarse. ‘The ichneumons!’

When Tunuva saw, a laugh of relief broke from her throat. Ninuru was racing towards them, a flash in the dark, Jeda a shadow behind. Without questioning their good fortune, Tunuva bundled Yeleni into the saddle and leapt on in front of her. Esbar dived for Jeda.

The Dreadmount was enraged. As the ichneumons’ paws scuffed over the plain, slabs of burning rock crashed down around them. The ground rippled and broke apart. Yeleni tightened her arms around Tunuva.

A shove of her hind legs, and Ninuru flew across a steaming crack. Tunuva turned in the saddle to see a fireball hurling towards Jeda.

‘Ez, behind you!’

Esbar threw up her palm. Siden flared and deflected the fire, leaving a trail of embers sparkling in her wake.

‘Nin, hurry,’ Tunuva urged her ichneumon. ‘Hurry—’

Ninuru barked. Each leap and stride took her farther than the last. Tunuva looked up at the streams of fire, close now, nearing a scarp of rock, almost on top of them. She closed her smarting eyes and clung to Ninuru, committing herself to the arms of the Mother.

Lava poured over the scarp. Not a moment too late, Jeda and Ninuru flew out of its path. It washed down the steep wall of rock and bubbled across the plain in a livid river, steaming and marbled with black. Heat washed over Tunuva. She went limp as the tension slid from her muscles.

It was some time before the ichneumons stopped running. By then, they were back on the high stretch of the salt road, and ash thickened the reeking air. The only light was their own flames.

‘Ninuru, stop,’ Tunuva could hardly speak. ‘Wait.’

She did, and Tunuva stepped down. ‘Tuva, we need to go,’ Esbar said, face lit by her fire.

Covered in a fine coating of ash, Tunuva gazed towards the Dreadmount. Glowing streams bled down its slopes. The black smoke had risen so high and wide, she could no longer see where it ended and the sky began. Stabs of lightning lit the gnarled knots and swells in it.

Again, a silence, pregnant with something unspeakable.

A tremor whispered beneath her boots, up her spine, back through her blood.

Then came a terrible sound, the like of which she had never heard, and hoped never to hear again. Not the crack of the eruption, or the sinister rumble that had been the herald. This sound was the grating of earth on earth, the ring of metal, the roar of a fire as it swallowed a house – a bellow of consuming rage that echoed across Mentendon.

As Tunuva Melim watched, five dark shapes emerged from the mountain and disappeared into the night. Five dark shapes with ten dark wings, flocked by dark moths that all screamed the same scream, old as the world.

In Drouthwick Castle, Glorian Berethnet woke from a strange dream. At her side, Lady Florell Glade cooled her forehead, which had been too cold a moment before.

‘Glorian?’

As Florell stroked her hair, Glorian opened her eyes.

‘It’s risen,’ she whispered.

After, she would not remember saying it at all.