



DREAMS OF THE DARK SKY

ONE
HUMAN

ONE
IMMORTAL

TWO
UNLIKELY
ALLIES

TINA LeCOUNT MYERS

"INTENSE AND AS SHARP AS AN ICICLE... AN EPIC FANTASY WORTH YOUR TIME."

—Teresa Frohock, author of *Miserere: An Autumn Tale*

This is an exclusive, uncorrected release.

Thank You For Reading This Excerpt From

Dreams of the Dark Sky

by Tina LeCount Myers.

The full book is will be available in
hard cover, paperback, and e-book
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Book 1 in the Legacy of Heavens series:
Dreams of the Dark Sky is currently available.

THE LEGACY OF THE HEAVENS
BOOK TWO

DREAMS OF THE DARK SKY

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For Jürgen

A cast of characters and two glossaries, one for English and another for Jápmemeahttun terms, can be found in the back of this book.

Dreams of the Dark Sky is the second book of the Legacy of the Heavens.

The first, *The Song of All*, introduced readers to the worlds of the Jápmemeahttun and the Olmmoš.



First among those created by the gods, the Jápmemeahttun lived in harmony on the fringes of the tundra until their numbers grew so large that they overwhelmed their lands. As they struggled to survive, the gods took pity and gave them a gift. The Jápmemeahttun would live their lives in two halves: the first as female and the second as male, and as one soul prepared to leave the world, another prepared to give birth. The life force of the gods would pass through the old soul into the unborn, giving the baby life and turning the mother's gender to male in the process. In this way, balance was soon restored to their population.



When the Olmmoš humans walked out of the east with their odd ways and their strange animals, the Jápmemeahttun welcomed them and taught them how to live upon the ice and snow and find light in the endless darkness. But over time, the humans grew wary of their guardians, whose lives seemed to stretch on forever.

What started as an affinity between two peoples ended in enmity as the humans rebelled against the authority of those they called the Immortals.

For generations, battles between humans and Immortals raged on, until the Immortal Elders discovered the Song of All. Believed to be a gift from the gods, the Song of All acted as a veil to shield the Immortals from human eyes so the two tribes could live in the same world and never interact. This fragile peace held for almost a hundred seasons of snow, until the Brethren of Hunters began to seek out the reclusive Immortals to regain their war-time power, now challenged by the priestly Order of Believers.

Raised by the Brethren, Irjan had avenged his family, slain by rogue Immortals, by becoming the most skilled among the Hunters. He eventually grew weary of bloodshed, though, and fled to live a peaceful life as a farmer, husband, and father. But when he came upon his wife and infant son moments before they died, Irjan suspected the Brethren. Even as he mourned his wife's death, Irjan tracked the Immortals deep into the snow-covered forest in the hope that their legendary powers would bring his infant son, Marnej, back to life.

The Jápmemeahttun life bringers Aillun and Djorn had journeyed together to their Origin to give birth. The inherent danger in this sacred ritual was compounded when they heard a human voice within the Song of All. As Aillun started to give birth and Djorn, the ancient warrior, began to die, Irjan ambushed them. Thrusting his infant son into the light emanating from the old Immortal's body, Irjan brought Marnej back from the dead. But Aillun's subsequent death left Irjan responsible for Dárja, the infant Immortal she had birthed.

Dávgon, the Brethren leader, dispatched his best hunters to bring back the traitor Irjan to serve the Brethren's cause or forfeit his life for his earlier betrayal. Irjan, to elude his former comrades, set off for the Northland, where he had once safely traveled. But Irjan's skills as a Hunter had not prepared him to care for two infants, and he was forced to rely upon the aid of

strangers. Drawn into a Brethren trap, Irjan's life was saved by Kalek, an Immortal healer who had been heart-pledged to Aillun. Together, Irjan and Kalek protected the infant Dárja, but could not prevent the Brethren from kidnapping Marnej.

Kalek soon learned that Aillun had made Irjan Dárja's guardian. Torn between his duty to his people and his lost love, Kalek brought Irjan to the immortal Elders and what he thought was safety. The Elders knew what Irjan had not yet accepted—the human Hunter, in fact, had dual heritage, and possessed the unique ability to enter the Song of All as if he were a Jápmemeahttun. But his arrival among them bound the Elders to choose between protecting their kind from the humans and respecting Irjan's right to live as one who had both human and Immortal blood. Their compromise to imprison Irjan temporarily staved off discontent.

While imprisoned, Irjan consoled himself with his friendship with Kalek and his responsibility for Dárja. However, he continued to harbor plans to rescue Marnej from the Brethren, who would turn his son into a killer. Irjan escaped at the first opportunity, forcing Kalek to choose between his new friendship and his tribe. Convinced by Irjan that his son's freedom would serve the Immortals, Kalek fought alongside his friend until he was wounded. When it became clear there was no hope of rescuing his son, Irjan chose to save Kalek's life, returning with him to the Northland, where he and Dárja were reunited. Irjan spent the next sixteen seasons of snow as a prisoner, teaching Dárja what he knew best—how to fight.

Dávgon, the Brethren leader, aware of Marnej's immortal blood and the unique abilities he possessed because of it, used Irjan's now-grown son to track the Immortals and foment war between the two tribes. When Marnej entered the Song of All, the Immortal Elders realized there was no hope for peace. Dárja, who had grown into a skilled fighter, ardently supported the call to war. However, the revelation that she would never experience a fully immortal life because of Irjan's interference in her birth confirmed her fear that Irjan had always loved his son, Marnej,

more than her. Determined to prove herself a true Immortal warrior, Dárja secretly joined the warrior ranks to confront the humans, unaware that Irjan had also joined as a last attempt at redemption.

When the Immortal warriors used the Song of All to attack the human soldiers in the Great Valley, Marnej pushed his way into the mêlée, anxious to demonstrate his loyalty to the Brethren. While Dárja fought her way through the human ranks, Irjan gave his life to protect his immortal comrades when the tide turned against them. Decimated by the human victory in the Great Valley, the remaining immortal warriors withdrew into the Song of All while Dárja was taken prisoner. At the Brethren's fortress, Dárja and Marnej confronted their shared past and discovered, to their surprise, the potential of their tenuous future.

DREAMS
OF THE
DARK
SKY

Part One

LOST TO THE SONG

CHAPTER ONE

KALEK PICKED AT THE meager meal of stewed rabbit and bitter greens. He ate out of habit, out of a healer's instinct to sustain his body, but, more and more, he wondered why he bothered.

A suppressed giggle broke through the hushed atmosphere in the dining hall. Kalek looked up from his bowl. Two young nieddaš sat with their heads together. One had a hand over her mouth. Her shoulders shook with laughter. The boaris scattered about the dining hall continued to eat. The old showed no interest in the lives of the young.

Once a lively center for sharing meals, the dining hall had become cheerless in the moon cycle since the battle with the Olmmoš. It was impossible to enter a common area and not think of those who had died defending their kind in the last battle. The Jápmemeahttun had believed the power of the Song of All would preserve peace by keeping them safely hidden. But the Olmmoš could not live in peace, and Kalek cursed the day they had walked out of the eastern dawn. He had not been born yet, but he knew the songs from before, when their kind had thrived in balance with the world around them.

Look at us now, he thought. The few Taistelijan warriors who had survived the battle stood out among the nieddaš and the

boaris. They were thankful to be alive, but they lived with the heavy burden of guilt. Indeed, it seemed that those who sought out healers, like himself, suffered less from an illness of the body and more from a sickness of the spirit. Increasingly, the old spent more time alone, listening to the Song of All, waiting for their time to end. They seemed to prefer the chorus of the wider world to the melancholy of their own immediate one. Yet, when called upon, they honored their duty as life bringers. They traveled to their Origins without complaint. Old and wise, they must have known that when their spirits left this world, new souls would likely not replace them.

But what alarmed Kalek most was not the pervasive sadness among the old, but the changes wrought among the young. Although the youngest still ran about playing innocent games, the older ones left childhood behind for hard work.

Wood for fires still needed to be chopped. Metal and leather still needed to be wrought. Animals still needed to be butchered. And fields still needed to be plowed. The survival of their kind depended on these tasks, which meant survival depended on the nieddaš, who were now the majority.

The necessary new duties had made many of the older and more capable nieddaš sullen and silent. They exhibited a harshness that had not existed before the battle. Still, when the time came for these nieddaš to return to their Origins and give birth, they struggled, restless and fearful, because what had once been a rite of passage had become, to their minds, a death sentence.

No one wanted to speak about what was happening, but none could ignore the fact that few nieddaš returned from birthing. Once, a nieddaš could expect to be a guide mother in the course of her life. Now she could only hope to be one. Kalek had seen the sidelong glances of those who still had no babe to love and nurture. And they all felt the palpable desperation as the songs of the guide mothers were sung less and less.

Despite his calling as a healer, Kalek found it hard to offer counsel to those nieddaš who came to see him. In their sad faces,

he saw Aillun, his beloved first heart-pledge, who had traveled to her Origin what felt like a lifetime ago. Believing she could save them both from sorrow, Aillun had not shared the truth of the quickening within her. At the time, Kalek had told himself his wounded heart justified his harsh last words. But really it was his injured pride that had made him growl like a trapped bear. Later, though, when Aillun failed to return from her Origin, he would learn what real heartache was. He would not be the one to send these innocent nieddaš to their death in the Outside.

“You have pushed your food from one side of your bowl to the other many times, Kalek.”

Startled by the voice, Kalek looked up.

“Lighten your heart and be done with your meal,” Okta said.

Kalek dropped the wooden spoon. He looked deep into the eyes of his mentor. A milky whiteness grew in them now, but the ancient healer’s gaze was still sharp and penetrating. He could not lie to his mentor, his friend.

“What are we doing?” he asked, hopelessness flooding his question.

Okta raised his unruly eyebrows. “We are surviving. As we always have.”

Kalek’s despair turned his gut sour. “To what end, Okta? We are defeated.”



Okta patted his apprentice’s hand. This was by now an old conversation between them.

“Kalek, even in defeat, there can be life.”

The young healer shook his head, his focus on the bowl in front of him. “We are all just waiting to die.”

“It has always been so,” Okta said gently.

Kalek’s head shot up. His pale, feverish eyes bore into Okta just as they had the day of the battle, when Kalek had found Irjan’s body. Nothing in the young healer’s training had prepared him to

see his friend and lover broken and bloodied. It did not matter that Irjan was part Olmmoš and had once hunted their kind. He had fought and died like a true Jápmemeahttun warrior. Then, as now, Okta knew that Kalek's giant frame could bear much, but anguish threatened to crush his soul.

"Fine words meant to play with one's thoughts," Kalek said. "They are not an answer."

Okta nodded his head, allowing the reproach to stand.

The old healer lifted his cup. He wished he could ease his apprentice's pain. He wanted Kalek to regain his spirit, to see beyond the death of friends and comrades, and the death of those he had loved. Aillun first. Then Irjan. Okta drained his tea, then placed the cup down.

"There are no words I can offer you, Kalek, that will be sufficient," he said. He stood and gathered his bowl and cup. "I will return to my chambers and then go out to gather herbs."

The ancient healer did not wait for his apprentice to answer, and Kalek did not try to stop him.



The knock upon the apothecary door stopped Okta at the garden's threshold. He considered ignoring it, longing to be outside where the rhythm of life pulsed, unchanged and welcoming. But a healer could not ignore someone in need. He backtracked through the crowded room filled with pungent herbs and distilling tinctures. He opened the door, surprised to see the Noaidi.

"Einár! This is unexpected. Are you feeling unwell?"

The Elder shook his head. "May I enter? I wish to speak with you."

The formality of the Elder's request placed Okta on guard. While the two shared a friendship that spanned ages, Einár was the head of the Council of Elders and the gods' Oracle. For the last several seasons of snow they had not agreed on much, but in the vast span of their lifetimes, this was but a small matter.

“I have not seen much of you since our return,” Okta said, standing back to allow the Elder’s hunched frame to enter the apothecary. *When did Einár become so thin? So frail?* he wondered.

“My time now is mostly spent with the gods,” Einár said with a matter-of-factness that belied the onus of being the Noaidi. “I try to understand their wishes, and our future.”

Okta hesitated. “And . . . what do they say?”

Einár clasped his hands in front of him. The sleeves of his pale-green linen robe fell down across his gnarled knuckles. “They say many things, but I am not here to speak of the gods. I am here to speak to you of Dárja.”

Okta winced. The name cut him like a knife. His hand rose to his chest where the weight of responsibility rested heavy and immutable.

He was to blame for what had come to pass, at least in part. He had been angry and callous when he had last spoken to Dárja. He had told her she would always be a nieddaš. That she would never be a mother. Never be an almai. Never be a warrior. He had been blunt and brutal, and he had immediately regretted it.

Despite all his training as a healer, Okta had not understood what it meant to live a singular life. His had been a Jápmemeaht-tun life. He had been a nieddaš. He had given birth. He had handed his child to her guide mother, then embraced his life as an almai. When asked, he had become a warrior. He had experienced it all, as his kind was meant to. But Dárja was unique, and Okta had failed her. They had all failed her.

“I have heard her song,” Einár said.

The calm pronouncement set Okta back on his heels. He braced himself on the edge of his scarred work table. Disbelief clouded his thoughts, but his heart pounded.

Dárja had disappeared the day the Taistelijan had marched to battle. He did not doubt she had wanted to prove herself worthy to be a warrior. To prove him wrong. And he was wrong. He was wrong to keep his doubts about her future to himself for as long as he had. He could have helped her. They all could have helped her. But the truth remained hidden for too long, too painful to relive.

Okta met the Elder's gaze. "She is alive, then?"

"Yes. I have heard her song."

Okta's elation made him eager to tell Kalek. The news would give the young almai the encouragement he needed. It would light the way back from the darkness that had consumed him.

Einár raised a hand to caution Okta. "There is more. I have also heard the song of Irjan's son."

Whatever hope had welled within in the ancient healer was dashed. "Marnej," he muttered, remembering Irjan's son, whose very existence had threatened what little peace remained to their kind. Silently, he blamed the boy, *So much life lost. So many lives changed. And Marnej at the root of it all.*

"I do not know what this means," the Elder continued, "but I leave you to make the choices you feel you must." He paused, then added, "The way you have always done."

Okta staggered back at the impact of this judgment. He glanced at Einár, expecting to see condemnation. Deep folds shaded the Elder's weary eyes. Okta's shame bloomed hot. He had just quietly denounced the Olmmoš boy when he should have castigated himself. Blame rested with him, not Irjan's son. Okta plopped down on the bench beside his work table. He was too old and he had seen too much to deny his attempt at playing a god. When Irjan had entered their lives, Okta had been adamant that, as half-Jápmemeahttun, Irjan deserved to live. But there was a part of him that now wondered if their kind might have been spared the recent tragedies had he just let the Taistelijan warriors track and kill Irjan in the very beginning.

"You have always listened to your heart, Okta," Einár said. "Sometimes for the betterment of us all, and sometimes to our detriment. But we are so few now." The Elder paused as if he chose his next words with care. "I am compelled to caution you. The actions of one will impact us all."

Okta nodded.

The Elder withdrew from the apothecary, closing the door behind him. Okta sat, taking stock of the news. The knowledge

that Dárja lived was both a profound joy and a subtle agony. Selfishly, he wanted to see her determined young face peer around his door again, if only to exonerate him for his part in her misery. But if that came to pass, he would once again have to cause her heartbreak. He would have to tell her of Irjan's death on the battlefield.

Young. Headstrong. She will only see her part in it, Okta thought woefully.

He could not say Dárja had been wrong to blame Irjan for what had happened. Irjan's actions had altered the course of all their lives. In trying to bring his son, Marnej, back from the gods' embrace, Irjan had doomed the life bringers, Aillun and Djorn. The life force created by a boaris at death was meant to help the nieddaš give birth to her child and then allow her to transform to almai. Djorn did not have the power to sustain life for more than two souls. Marnej had been reborn, but Aillun died. And Dárja had been denied the life force she needed to mature fully as one of their kind.

When Irjan had pleaded to join the warriors leaving to fight the Olmmoš, Okta had recognized a man desperate for some kind of redemption. While he did not agree with the need for bloodshed, he respected Irjan's desire to be a part of it. He had not talked Irjan out of fighting. Rather, he had helped him, and embraced him, and watched him ride into battle. His heart had ached for the man. Half Jápmemeahttun and half Olmmoš, Irjan had labored to do what was right and had suffered for love.

Kalek was right to agonize over how to tell Dárja this truth, he mused to himself. *If she were to walk through his door right now . . .* The thought disappeared almost as soon as it formed.

Okta leaned forward to rest his hands on his knees. The anticipation kindled by Einár's news flickered briefly before reason snuffed it out. Dárja may be alive, but she could easily be a prisoner or pursued by the Brethren of Hunters, by Marnej even. Okta was certain that, despite the distant connection between Dárja and Marnej, if their songs were heard together, then it could only

mean she was in danger. Marnej had been raised an as Olmmoš. Raised to be a Pijikij, like his father, he had sworn an oath to kill their kind. Marnej might be Irjan's son, but he was also a Hunter.

Okta wanted to act. He wanted to do something. But Einár's warning stung his conscience like summer nettles. In the past, Okta had sent Kalek out to meddle in the affairs of the Olmmoš, believing it to be the best course of action. And he knew if he told Kalek that Dárja's song had been heard, his apprentice would rush into the Outside to try to find her. Kalek was as much a guide mother to the girl as Irjan, even if Irjan was her chosen biebmoeadni.

Okta wrestled with his thoughts. The reasonable part of his mind said it would be futile to send Kalek out to save Dárja. She could be dead within days. But the truth was that he could not bear the thought of losing Kalek. He had risked his apprentice's life twice, believing the chance for peace was justified. But never again. Kalek was too dear to him and the future was now too uncertain to risk anything on some notion of pride.



Okta still sat with his hands upon his knees when Kalek entered the apothecary. If any misgivings persisted, they disappeared the instant he saw his apprentice. Framed by his pale, lank hair, the young almai's doubt-etched brow overshadowed his face. *If the gods possess pity they will place no more demands upon him*, Okta thought, then silently promised, *Nor will I*.

"I thought you had left to collect herbs," Kalek said, surprised to see Okta.

"Yes, yes. I became distracted and delayed," the ancient healer said, staying within the bounds of truth.

Kalek passed by his mentor, briefly touching Okta's shoulder. "Come, I will help you."

Okta watched Kalek's sure, fluid movement around the apothecary. How different their paths had been. He remained

grateful that Kalek had not had to fight in the war. Too young for the ancient battles and too valuable for this last stand, Kalek had been spared. But even as he praised the gods for this small mercy, he knew that the young almai had not really been spared. To watch one's kind slowly die over a lifetime might prove to be a greater cruelty than witnessing comrades killed in battle.

"Thank you, Kalek," Okta finally said. "I much prefer your company to my own."

A feeble smile graced the almai's face. "That is only because you are so old and your own company so familiar."

"True," Okta agreed with a knowing laugh, "I find that, in your company, I need to bend less to pluck the right herbs."

Kalek took the thin woolen cloak from its worn peg. He held it out to Okta who stood. Kalek's smile lingered, but it did not reach his eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HIGH PRIEST OF the Order of Believers felt the tingle of satisfaction as his bishops, soldiers, and servants bowed their heads and murmured their greetings. “My Vijns” rose up through the smoke-blackened rafters of the great hall’s vaulted ceiling.

Bávvál offered a casual wave of his hand to acknowledge the deference of those gathered, then dabbed the sweat that beaded his closely cropped hairline. The summer’s stultifying heat had pressed its way into the airless hall, but Bávvál still wore his full ceremonial raiment. The fox collar clung to his neck, as the woolen cloak dragged across the earthen floor. Even with the lightest weaves, the long length of blue cloth tugged upon the clasp at this neck, chafing him with each step.

Still, Bávvál would not have changed anything for comfort’s sake. His robes were a sign of his power. He was the Vijns, the Breath of the Gods. He had been the one to prevail where his predecessors had failed. He had seen the end of the Jápmea Immortals. *Immortals*, he scoffed silently, the rancor of their ancient name upon his tongue. *Jápmea scourge, more like. A pestilence finally cleaved from this world. And the Brethren of Hunters will soon join them in obscurity.*

With no Immortals, there was no need for Immortal hunters. The Brethren’s bid to wrest power from the Believers, from

him, was at an end. Bávvál took delight in how easy it had been to manipulate the Brethren's honor and their oath to protect the Olmmoš from the Jápmea.

Their sacred Oath. Bávvál sniffed at the thought.

A few worthless concessions to the Brethren's leader, Dávgon—and a well-placed spy—and Bávvál had discovered the truth about their treachery. Whatever dreams of power Dávgon had envisioned for himself and his precious Piijkij, they would be crushed forever when it was revealed that the Brethren of Hunters had harbored among their ranks the very abominations they had sworn to kill.

Bávvál smiled to himself as he stepped onto the ornate wooden dais. The smell of warmed beeswax enveloped him. He approached the carved pillars that flanked the lone imposing chair. The pillars, with their snarling bears, were a fiercesome sight, but it was the chair that truly symbolized Bávvál's authority. He had ordered the blackened wood to be inlaid with bone. Light and dark, like life, where days and souls were measured by the light and the dark they contained.

If he were to remake the chair now, Bávvál would use the Brethren's bones in place of the reindeer and the cow horn that had been used. Indeed, he might yet do just that. It would be a testament to his achievements, and a warning to any who would challenge him. Pleased with this new idea, Bávvál turned and released the silver clasp at his neck. His robe fell with a heavy rustle. He looked out on the crowded-yet-hushed room before easing himself into his seat of power.

Slowly, those standing came to life once again with shuffling feet and overlapping voices.

"Rikkar," he called to a retreating figure.

The man came to a jerking stop, then turned on his heel, his downy hair a nimbus above his sloped shoulders. Rikkar looked to all sides to see who else had noticed him, then hurried toward the dais, hesitating at the edge. Bávvál waved him forward.

"My Vijns," he said, bowing before the High Priest.

Bávvál eyed the man's thin arms and boney wrists with distaste. He had known Rikkar since they were both acolytes. *Scarcely off our mothers' teats*, he recalled with nostalgia. His mother had chosen not to claim him when a better offer of a handmate had been made. The new man wanted nothing to do with the last man's seed, and the Believers gained another body to serve the gods. Rikkar, on the other hand, had been the cherished son of a Believer priest. Coddled and praised as a youth, Rikkar had grown up believing in his own ordained ascendance. Indeed, one could not deny he was a gifted orator and a passionate Believer. However, his presumption was not matched by an aptitude for advancement.

Rikkar had been clumsy in his efforts to rise above his position as village priest. He had sought to use one of the Brethren's disgraced Piijkij for his own gains and when that failed, he was compelled to ally himself more closely with the Brethren. Bávvál, in due course, forgave him his treachery. As High Priest, he respected ambition. In fact, he much preferred it to passion. Ambition was predictable, zealous faith rarely. Yet Rikkar had surprised him. *Throwing his lot in with the Brethren*. Now that, Bávvál had not foreseen. Still, as was the way with most fledgling conspirators, Rikkar had made mistakes, only to find himself caught between the bear and the eagle.

Rikkar had gaped like a fish upon land when Bávvál had confronted him. It was an amusing recollection. All the more gratifying for the outcome. Seventeen seasons of snow as a viper in the Brethren's nest. *And Dávgon none-the-wiser*.

"Has word been sent to the Brethren's fortress?" Bávvál asked, leaving the past for the present.

"Yes, my Vijns," Rikkar said through a thin-lipped smirk.

"I see this prospect pleases you, Rikkar." Bávvál kept his tone light. "There was a time when these Hunters were your brothers-in-arms."

The man's smile faded. "An error you helped me to realize. Through your grace I will sit upon the Court of Counselors."

"You are not wearing the Counselor's robe yet," Bávvál warned, his words clipped. He had forgiven the priest his trespass. He had not forgotten the betrayal.

"Yes, my Vijns." Rikkar inclined his head, revealing the pale scalp of his tonsure.

"And what is Dávgon's intention?" Bávvál asked, growing impatient with the man's fawning.

"They are preparing to journey here for an audience, my Vijns."

"In what numbers?"

"It is to be a large retinue. The Avr wishes to make an impression upon all who might see the Brethren."

Bávvál frowned, more from disgust than concern. "What of the Jápmea?"

"You can be assured he is bringing her." Excitement had crept back into Rikkar's voice. "The boy will likely be among the escorts, as he is often at Dávgon's side."

Rikkar's eager countenance annoyed Bávvál. "You will not be missed?" he asked with a hint of mockery.

Rikkar blinked, his eyes momentarily downcast. "I am tolerated, but not sought for my company or my joik," he said. Then, with a rueful laugh, he added, "They would be shocked to hear the story of my life sung." And, as if to himself, he whispered, "Indeed, I am."

"My Vijns," a penetrating voice from the crowd broke into the quiet.

Rikkar stirred.

Aware of his priest's shame, Bávvál looked out into those gathered. "Come forward," he said to no one in particular. Then, to Rikkar, he said with uncharacteristic kindness, "The gods thank you."

"As I thank the gods," Rikkar mumbled in a thick voice, then withdrew, swerving around an approaching servant, who momentarily teetered with his laden tray of food.

The servant knelt, presenting the tray to the High Priest with deference. Bávvál picked at slices of cold goose, leaving aside the

dark bread and hard, pungent cheese. He had just taken a bite when his counselors appeared before him, each affecting a more dignified aspect than the next.

"My Vijn's," the eldest in the group spoke up, his voice more of a croak. A weak attempt at a smile merged his wrinkles together, a look that most would mistake for an ailment. "We must address the matter of these soldiers."

The other counselors nodded in agreement, but let their deputy carry on.

"We cannot continue to quarter them within the Stronghold. There are too many. They have depleted our stores."

"I see no need to keep them," the youngest counselor interrupted, his impatience winning out over prudence. "The Jápmea are defeated."

Bávval shifted his attention to Erke, the young counselor, regretting his decision to raise the thankless cur. "There is much you do not see," the High Priest commented, turning away from the sallow-faced youth to address the ancient counselor. "Your concern is noted. For the time being, we will maintain the soldiers at the Stronghold. Increase the requisitions from as far afield as you must go. When I am assured, then we will distribute the soldiers to safeguard the temples."

"Safeguard against what?" the callow youth blustered.

The comment, whether born of simple-mindedness or outright insolence, tested Bávval's forbearance and coalesced his resolve to be rid of the young counselor at the first opportunity. No amount of coin or patronage was worth his irritating presence.

"The soldiers," Bávval said, "will safeguard against any who dispute my power. And to make sure, Erke, you shall join their ranks. No doubt they will benefit from the wealth of your wisdom." The youth blanched, then looked as if he were about to protest. Bávval cut him off with a curt dismissal. "The gods thank you."

Taking the cue, the counselors bowed their heads. "As we thank the gods," they intoned as one, then scurried away. Their flaxen robes flapped about them.

Bávvál picked up another piece of cold goose from the tray beside him. He popped it into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully as he considered his next step.

“Get me Áigin,” he said to the servant standing just beyond his sight. When Bávvál heard no movement, he looked over his shoulder to see the boy anxiously craning his neck in every direction before running off like a startled deer.

“My Vijn, you wished to see me.”

With a jolt, Bávvál swiveled in the other direction. “Áigin,” he said, stifling his gasp.

The reed of a man inclined his head. His long, thinning hair fell forward to frame his composed face.

“Dávgon is bringing his pets to us,” Bávvál began without preamble. “The march will likely be a gaudy display meant to impress farmers and villagers. Two regiments are to leave immediately. I want their fortress burned and every Piijkij in chains. Make sure the commanders know to stay well away from Dávgon’s procession. I do not want the surprise I have planned ruined by carelessness.”

“It will be done,” the gaunt man replied with the assurance of one unaccustomed to doubt or disappointment.

Bávvál held up his hand to forestall Áigin’s departure. “Make sure I never have to hear from Counselor Erke again. But allow his family to mourn his shocking accident.” Then, almost as an afterthought, he added. “The gods thank you, as I thank you.”

Áigin nodded, then slipped away as silently as he had appeared.

CHAPTER THREE

MARNEJ AWOKE FROM FITFUL dreams drenched in sweat. He sat up in his bunk, sliding his legs out from under knotted covers. The cool earthen floor beneath his bare feet reassured him. No thrum. No pulse. No voices in his head other than his own. *Thank the gods.* But even as he thought this, Marnej's gratitude foundered on the fact that these were the same gods who'd blighted his life. They had made him different. *Made him . . . what?* He didn't know.

The girl, Dárja, claimed he was Jápmeahttun. An Immortal, like her. Marnej told himself that it was a lie. She was the Brethren's prize from the Great Battle. She would say anything to gain her freedom. Still, she knew about the voices. She heard them too.

Marnej shook his head to clear his doubts. *Just because I sometimes hear voices doesn't mean I'm a Jápmea.* But a part of him knew that he was deceiving himself. How else could he explain his visions before the battle or the strange way his world had dissolved into another—one where everything felt disturbingly alive. He shivered at the recollection.

She'd called it a gift. Marnej snorted. It was a curse that set him apart from the other Piijkij. They didn't trust him. He saw it in the way they looked at him. But he was loyal. Above all else,

he was loyal to the Brethren of Hunters. Unlike his father, Irjan, who had betrayed the Brethren by walking away from his duty and his oath. Just like he'd walked away from Marnej.

Irjan had never cared about him, no matter what the Jápmea girl had said. Still, for one brief moment, Marnej let himself believe that his father had always loved him. He let himself envision a life where he was accepted. Wanted. Even now his heart leapt at the possibility. His breath was quick and ragged with longing. Disgusted, he pushed away the desire as he hastily propelled himself to his feet.

The girl's Jápmea. She'd say anything to escape, he reminded himself.

"I *am* loyal," he muttered as he tugged his shirt over his head, the cord lacing catching on his tangled hair.

Manej stuffed his still-bare feet into his boots, whose worn leather fit like a second skin. He'd proved himself on the battlefield. The Avr had said so.

"You've honored the Brethren of Hunters," he'd said. "You are now a Piijkij."

This last part rankled. Marnej had been raised a Piijkij. He'd been raised to hunt and kill the Immortals. He'd taken the Oath like all the others, and he'd upheld his promise. It had been the Avr who'd asked him to use his gifts. He'd done what was asked of him, but there'd been a subtle change in the Avr after that. Marnej felt the man's eyes on him, as if he might prove treacherous, like his father before him. But Marnej owed his allegiance to the head of the Brethren of Hunters, if only for the fact the man had given him a home among the Piijkij, even after his father's betrayal.



Marnej strapped his miehkki to his side. Little more than a moon cycle had passed since his sword had been bathed in Jápmea blood. Now, it was cleaned and honed, resting comfortably at his hip, waiting. Marnej fell in step with the other Piijkij. Those more

senior than him grumbled about the High Priest of the Believers who had commanded their attendance.

“... as if we were his personal soldiers.”

“It’s thanks to us he sits on that pretty throne of his.”

“I hear the one he shits in is even grander.”

“Doesn’t change the smell,” the seasoned Hunter beside Marnej said, then elbowed him. “Cheer up, whelp.”

Marnej snapped to attention, nodding with a half-hearted grin.

At the stable, Marnej saddled his horse before leading the beast out into the fresh morning air. The sun cut through the tops of the tall pine and larch trees, forcing him to shield his eyes. When they adjusted, he saw the girl seated on a horse with her hands tied together in front of her. Even so, she held her head high.

“What’s she doing here?” Marnej asked, covering his surprise with disdain.

“A reminder to the people that we’re the ones who saved their rotten hides from the likes of her kind,” a voice replied, then Bihto’s head popped up above the shaggy dun-colored back of a neighboring horse. A toothy smile split his square face as the aging Piijkij settled in his saddle with an appreciative grunt.

“Not much to look at, though,” Bihto added with a nod to the Jápmea girl. “All gristle. Like a cockerel. They say they had to pry the sword from her fingers.”

Marnej made a vague reply. He knew better than Bihto what the Jápmea girl was capable of. He had faced her once in a chance encounter. From the moment he’d seen her move, he’d known his father had trained her. At the time, Marnej had begrudged Irjan for stepping between them. But he now realized the gods had spared him that day. The girl was more skilled a Hunter than he was. It made him uneasy thinking he’d almost let her out of her cell to prove her wrong about his father. She’d been toying with him, just as she had when she’d wielded her sword against him.

“Only when the ravens have plucked out their eyes should you lower your blade against an Immortal,” Marnej said, quoting an old Brethren axiom.

“True enough,” Bihto agreed, nudging his horse into an easy walk beside Marnej.



Dárja squinted, but did not raise her bound hands to block the light. After the darkness of her cell, it took a long time to make out the shapes in front of her. Scents, however, assaulted her from all sides. Horse dung, leather, and the stench of the Olmmoš. Dárja was by now inured to her own rank odor, and though she wished to bathe, she wore the dried bloodstains with honor. No one could look at her and question her skill as a warrior.

A fresh breeze from the east momentarily banished the circling flies. Dárja shook the hair from her face. She caught sight of a familiar profile from the corner of her eye. Without turning her head, she observed Marnej riding toward her. He passed without a glance in her direction. Dárja sniffed. She should’ve expected nothing less. She’d offered him the truth and he’d run from it like a frightened rabbit. Nor had he revisited her. His alleged interest in his father, Irjan, had been nothing but idle curiosity. *He’s not worthy of his father’s love*, she thought contemptuously.

Dárja looked around at the ugly faces of the Olmmoš. Their eyes were too big, too wide. She looked for the older Olmmoš, the one who’d often come to stare at her through the crude iron bars of her cell. The one with a broad, furrowed brow and shorn hair the color of ash. His powerful bearing suggested he held standing among the Piijkij. What he thought of her, she couldn’t tell. By torchlight, he would hold her unwavering gaze for a time, then walk away, taking the light with him.

After each of his visits, Dárja would close her eyes, weighed down by the leaden silence of the Olmmoš world. The torchlight would still flicker behind her lids for a few moments more. She’d shiver, overwhelmed by the lifelessness of everything around her. She would let her inner voice go out in search of the Song of All. In search of her kind. But she heard no answer. No other voice

but her own. Desolation would incite her to try again and again to find that precious connection she so craved. And when that failed, she tried to fashion Irjan's face in her mind's eye. But the visions always faded before she could outline his features. She worried she was forgetting what he looked like. She worried she was forgetting the one who had loved and cared for her better than any guide mother could have.

Then the oppressive darkness would take possession of her. It would contort her doubts into deep-seated dread. *He's probably already forgotten you*, she'd taunt herself. And she deserved it. She'd said such terrible things to Irjan. But she'd been so angry. Her whole life had been shaped by his love for his son, Marnej. Her future traded for his. She'd left Irjan resolved to prove she was a warrior, even if her body would never change. The single-mindedness of her purpose had fueled her on the battlefield. It had made her relentless. It had kept her alive. But now, living meant little if she could not tell Irjan that she regretted her anger.

The squat horse beneath her jerked into motion. Dárja grabbed a hank of the horse's mane to keep herself from falling off. The reins, tethered to the Olmmoš rider in front of her, stretched taut. The horse's broad back was uncomfortable. She felt as if she were an unwieldy load. When she rode upon her binna, she and the reindeer were one. They rode quick and sure with their songs entwined. She would never understand why the Olmmoš would want to ride a creature like a horse whose spirit had been broken.

A wet splat landed on Dárja's cheek, jarring her once again. She let the spittle of the passing Píijkij ooze down her face. She glared at him, then raised herself to her full height. Her eyes ahead, she thought about all the Olmmoš she'd killed on the battlefield. She hoped a good number of them were Píijkij. *Dead in their own shit and offal*, she thought with grim pride. And if she got the chance, she would make sure more would follow their comrades before death claimed her. She didn't fear her death. In fact, part of her welcomed it. Better to die than to live among these

people, as Marnej had done. Better that Irjan never know his love for his son had been so sadly misplaced.

Dárja began to hum to herself. At first softly, then, as probing stares turned in her direction, she raised her voice to recite the battlecry of her kind.

*We are the Taistelijan.
We are the warriors of the Jápmemeahttun.
Our swords serve our kind in death,
Our knowledge our continued life.
We walk into battle to end what was long ago begun.*

Dárja had never uttered these words aloud, outside of the Song of All. But it felt good to use her voice. Her next chorus grew even louder, demanding attention.

From farther up the line she saw Marnej turn in his saddle. Even at this distance, Dárja could see his shock. He gawked at her as if he had never seen her before. She sang a third chorus as a shout, as though she meant to be heard in the Pohjola.

“Shut her up,” someone growled.

Dárja opened her mouth, then crumpled forward, grunting as pain exploded in her arm. She only just managed to grab hold of the saddle before her weight carried her over the side of the horse. She squeezed tight her eyes. Her breath was a shaky wheeze, but she willed herself to sit up. The blow to her arm had ripped apart the tender new skin that had formed on her battle-wound. Blood seeped fresh and red through the old brown stains on her sleeve. She did nothing to staunch the blood. Rather, she began to hum again, low and insistent, a new refrain forming in her mind:

*I am the voice of one brought to life by truth.
And by my sword that truth shall be set free.
I am watched over by the stars, but my destiny is my own to make.*



Marnej turned back around, his pulse racing. He'd heard that chant before. He'd been lost in one of his visions and one voice had built upon another until every fiber of his being had vibrated with the power of that chorus. *We are the Taistelijan*. The chant had wound its way through him, seeking out his doubts, his desires, his soul. He'd felt their heartbeats. He'd known the Jápmea pride and their power. He'd seen their flashing swords and green fields and felt the pull to join their ranks. *We walk into battle to end what was long ago begun*.

Marnej's stomach turned at the memory. He'd thought he'd glimpsed the future, but his visions had betrayed him, and he'd led the Olmmoš into an ambush. His hands suddenly felt slick. He released his grip on the reins and wiped his palms one after the other on his coarse linen sleeves. The fabric's rough weave snagged on his scabs, tugging them just as the Jápmea girl tugged upon his thoughts.

She'd known about the voices. She'd spoken of them as if he should understand her meaning. But he hadn't understood. He only knew the voices had always been there. They'd been a comfort in childhood, then a cause for concern as he grew up. Marnej thanked the gods the Avr had not asked him to seek out the visions again, because doubt now plagued him. He could no longer tell himself it was the gods working through him, nor would he accept that it had been the Jápmea.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR THE BETTER PART of two days, the Brethren of Hunters' procession had moved slowly through the countryside. They had passed fields and farms where families came forward to point or just stare at the Jápmea girl. In the villages, people lined the narrow path. They jeered as the prisoner passed, throwing whatever was at hand at her. Dávgon was pleased that the Jápmea girl reminded people that the Brethren's victory had finally made them all safe. *Our victory*, he thought. And it was *their* victory. *They* had tracked the Immortals. And *they* had led the soldiers into battle. Without the Brethren, all would have been lost.

Dávgon looked over his shoulder at the Jápmea girl who rode with a straight back. She sneered through muddied features, as if it were he and not she who smelled of rot and death. But no amount of pride could change the fact she was his prisoner. *Perhaps the last of her kind*, he speculated with some regret, loathing the prospect of giving his prize to the High Priest. Bávvál had so little vision. He would probably just kill her in some crude display, when there were so many more interesting possibilities.

Dávgon searched the company for Marnej. He spotted the boy's blond head amid the grizzled grey of the veterans. He watched the boy ride. Nothing about him seemed worthy of

suspicion. Still, the matter of the Jápmea ambush at the outset of the battle disturbed Dávgon. At the time, Marnej had been as surprised as the rest by the trap. Were it not for that, Dávgon would have believed it a deliberate betrayal. But the young Pijikij had proved useful in the end. Jápmea blood ran through the boy's veins. How much, he did not know. Less than Irjan, to be sure. But the boy was no less talented than his father. It begged the question of what might come of mating him with the girl. *The secrets I could learn*, he mused. *The power I could wield*. The Avr turned forward again, determined now to keep his prize.

Ahead, the Believers' Stronghold loomed. It was a hulking structure above a barren morass. The great swaths of trampled marsh were the same lifeless brown as the defense picket and the inner palisade beyond. Indeed, the only color for a league around were the long banners of the tower. Dull yellow on a fading blue background, the Ten Stars of the Bear bent and twisted as the banners snaked across the cloud-dotted sky.

Dávgon held up his fist. The retinue came to a stop. At his signal, the advanced guard dismounted and approached the gate. Their footfalls thundered across the bridge planks. Dávgon sat astride his horse, noting with growing irritation that their arrival had gone unheralded. *Not even a sentry*, he thought as he followed his men through the arched battlement. It was just another example of Believer carelessness that he would change. Discipline would prevail under the Brethren's guidance.

A pair of dusty and disheveled soldiers came running forward with short pikes in their hands. As they neared, the Brethren's advance guard closed ranks to stop them.

"The Avr of the Brethren of Hunters enters for an audience with the High Priest," one of the Pijikij boomed.

"By whose order?" the larger of the two soldier's challenged.

Dávgon bristled at the insult. His men answered for him, casting aside the two soldiers as if they were nothing more than sacks of grain. The soldiers moaned and rolled on the ground but seemed unwilling to rise again. Dávgon rode forward, his advance

guard cleared the way with weapons drawn. Some of Believers' soldiers milling about took interest in the arrival of the men who had so recently led them into battle. More, however, hurried off, intent on avoiding the work the arrival of the Brethren entailed.

The mounted procession followed the advanced guard through the Stronghold until they reached the stables. At the long, overhung corral, Dávgon signaled for the rest of his men to dismount. The ground fairly shook as their boots landed on the dirt. A haze of billowing dust swirled around restive hooves and anxious feet, then settled back down on the unwelcoming earth.

The Jápmea girl sat upon her horse with her head held high as if she commanded the men around her. Dávgon's appreciation of her brazenness waned. He muttered to a man beside him to pull her down. The Píijkij nodded, stepped forward through the horses, and yanked the Immortal from her saddle. She writhed on the ground for a moment, then gathered her breath and released a stream of abuses that could not be ignored.

"Silence her," Dávgon called out.

Rough hands pulled the girl to her feet, but she ignored the two men at her side to stare fixedly at him as her voice rang out.

It is I. Truth calls me.

And by my honored blade, the honest word shall set me free.

I am safeguarded by the stars, but my hands shape my future.

Though her phrasing was old and stilted, Dávgon understood her well enough. "Keep her quiet," he said as he turned on his heel to march through the ornate doors that marked the sanctum of the Order of Believers.



The hall buzzed with interest as the normally smug clergy peeked over each other's shoulders with wide eyes. Parting just enough to allow Dávgon and his retinue to enter, the onlookers closed

ranks in an awkward crush. The High Priest sat in his garish chair upon the dais at the room's far end. The man's finery was wasted on him. Sickly, with the aspect of a rat, Bávvál would have been culled early had he come up through the Brethren ranks.

Whispers trailed Dávgon's footfalls.

He stopped well short of the dais, greeting the High Priest with a curt nod and no further deference to the man's title.

The small man stood, overshadowed by the carved bears on the flanking pillars, then stepped forward, dragging his long cloak the length of the dais. Bávvál's dignity, however, was undone by the sweat that coursed down from his temples.

"What treasure have you brought me, Dávgon?" he asked.

The Avr's muscles tensed at the man's possessive tone. "We have *our* Jápmea prisoner," he said, emphasizing ownership.

The priest smiled coyly. "Just the one?"

"We killed the rest," Dávgon said, his rage at the priest's lack of respect building.

The High Priest nodded appreciatively. "Yes. Yes. The tales of the Pijikij are all I hear of these days."

"The deserving should be lauded when the Jápmea are defeated," Dávgon seethed.

"Indeed! And we wish to hear of your campaign in great detail. In fact, I have sent for my bishop to record the events for posterity." The High Priest looked over his shoulder. "Ah, here he is now. Dávgon, I believe you are acquainted with Rikkar. He has just become my bishop. A reward for his faithful service to the Believers and his Vijns."

Dávgon's hand touched the hilt of his sword, the bitter taste of bile rising in his gorge.

"Rikkar had the most interesting things to tell me," the High Priest clapped his hands in mocking delight. "He said you have within your ranks a Jápmea. Now, perhaps he meant this girl you bring me, but I think not."

The High Priest dropped all pretense. "Dávgon, did you really believe I would not find out that you rely upon a Jápmea for your

battle plans? Or, have you been blind to their cunning infiltration of your company? Because, I know firsthand it is easier to gain access to your Brethren than to a woman's skirt."

"Lying rat!" Dávgon spat as he rushed the High Priest with his sword drawn.



Dárja kicked the Piijkij to her right in the knee. She pulled herself free from the other Hunter with a wrenching twist of her entire body. The effort carried her to the ground. She rolled backward, avoiding the crush of rushing boots as the whole room spasmed with men fighting and dying.

Dárja saw Marnej rooted in place, slack-jawed. She tore the gag from her mouth.

"Marnej, run!" she yelled, then sprang to her feet.

Dárja shoved her way through the tumult, crashing into a door at full speed. The stout barrier held. Someone grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. She raised her bound wrists to clobber her attacker and caught the corner of Marnej's chin. He staggered back but kept his grip on her.

Dárja writhed. "Let go of me."

Marnej held tight, his face grim.

Dárja's frustration boiled over. "Even *they* know what you are," she raged, trying to tear her arms free. "But I suppose you're still loyal." She said loyal as if it made her sick. "Loyal to men who want to use you. Men who've only ever used you."

Even in the torchlight, Dárja saw Marnej's face flush.

He pulled the knife from his belt, then raised its point at her. Dárja bucked and kicked, her eyes on the glinting blade. Marnej's face was a cold mask.

He raised his blade higher as he grasped Dárja by her wrists. Then, with a deft cut, her hands were free. Marnej reached around her waist without touching her. He pulled back the bolt on the door, then handed her his knife as he drew the sword at his side.

Stunned, Dárja trailed Marnej as he rushed into the courtyard just beyond the hall.

Marnej slashed at the unsuspecting guards.

Dárja grabbed a dead soldier's sword in time to slice upwards, across the soft flesh of an exposed neck. The man's throat sprayed blood into her eye. She wiped it away, but another soldier was already upon her. She swung wildly as her vision blurred. She heard a grunt, then lashed out again, swinging blindly at anything in her way. As she ran, Dárja wiped her face with her forearm, footfalls pounding behind her. She planted her foot, then turned to attack, nearly cleaving Marnej's arm as he fended off two soldiers. Dárja reeled with the momentum, but recovered herself in time to skewer one of the soldiers. Then she and Marnej fought their way past the palisade and picket, taking advantage of the confusion.

As they crossed into the open ground, Dárja sprinted ahead, despite her feet sinking deeper and deeper into the marshy ground. Arrows fell around her with deadly splats. Still, she ran. Her eyes focused on the distant trees. Their tall trunks seemed so impossibly far. Surely an arrow would find her before she found herself in their safety. Dárja ran—begging the gods, then cursing them. She ran until branches whipped about her, stinging her face and arms.

Bleeding and winded, Dárja turned back toward the way she'd come. Bent, with her hands on trembling knees, she watched Marnej. His arms and legs pumped back and forth as he labored to free himself from the fen's sticky hold. She looked beyond him to where the Olmmoš drew their bows. There were mounted soldiers behind the archers now.

Dárja stood up. She held out her arm as she shouted, "Run! Marnej! Horses!"

Then she felt the hot grasp of his hand in hers. He pulled her forward, and together they ran farther into the willow shrubs and downy birch that filled the gaps between larger pines.

"Wait," she cried.

Marnej dragged her ahead.

"We'll never outrun them," she said, breathless. "We have to find the Song."

He grunted. Dárja dug in her heels. She wrestled free her hand.

"We have to find the Song!"

Marnej rounded on her. "I don't know what that means."

"The voices," she said, searching for something he would understand. "We have to find the voices."

Marnej shook his head. "We don't have time." He started to turn away.

"It's the only way," she said, hating the precious moments they were wasting by arguing.

He spun to face her. "I can't just . . ." He stopped short. "Besides you said you couldn't hear them."

Dárja groaned, suddenly wanting to be free of Marnej's hesitancy. She could just find the Song herself and be done with him. But even as she thought it, doubt crept up. She pushed it back down. "That's when I was alone," she said, grabbing Marnej's arm. "But together . . . together we can find it."

"I can't just summon the voices like that," he hedged, shaking his head.

Still, he didn't pull away from her.

"Try," she implored, glancing back over her shoulder, catching movement through the trees. She faced Marnej, taking his hands in hers. "Do whatever it is you need to," she said. "I'll do the rest."

Marnej closed his eyes. Dárja thought he'd begun seeking out the Song. Then his eyes opened. Uncertainty lurked behind their pale suspicion.

"What if it doesn't work?" he asked.

Dárja met his gaze. "Then we'll fight and we'll die."

Marnej nodded, his mouth set with determination. He closed his eyes. Dárja said a silent prayer to the gods, then focused her mind on the Song of All. She repeated her song again and again, as if she could conjure all the other voices. Then she thought of

the ground below and the trees around and the sky above. She was a part of it all. She sang her song for the ground, the trees, and the sky.

I am daughter of the gods.

I am sister among the Jápmemeabttun.

I started my life at my Origin, with sadness and joy as my companions.

I have braved dangers and met enemies and can see the truth of friendship.

I go into the world to meet my destiny, knowing that the stars watch over me.

For a long moment, Dárja heard nothing. Then like the eagle's piercing cry she heard:

I am the vessel of a father's soul.

I have journeyed into the realm of the dreams of the dark sky,

And traveled back in a blaze of light.

I enter into the world to meet my destiny,

Knowing that I have been touched by the gods.

Then all the other songs came flooding in. The trees. The rocks. The birds high on the branches. She felt the raven's breath as it swooped down across the marsh and felt the trees sigh in the new breeze. The earth pulsed like her own heart and she'd never been gladder or more relieved. Dárja wanted to stay as she was, to bask in the beauty and the power of being connected to everything. Most of all, she wanted to find Irjan's song. She longed to hear its strange sadness that she'd found a comfort all her life.

But she couldn't. There was Marnej. His presence tugged at her, as if he might pull her back into the Olmmoš realm. Then she heard his song again and this time it was strong and sure. Dárja opened her eyes. Marnej swayed before her like a sapling, then his eyes snapped open, and he doubled over, retching.

Dárja looked beyond his hunched, heaving body, to where the soldiers ran toward them. Their faded yellow tunics darted

in and out of the farthest trees. At any moment they would be upon them. The chorus of surging voices swirled around Dárja in a heady mixture of comfort and confidence. She took her fighting stance, instinctively tightening her grip on her sword.

Marnej moaned but seemed to register the change in her stance. He pushed himself to stand just as the soldiers ran past them. He flinched. Gently, so as not to startle him, Dárja touched his shoulder. He turned to face her, swaying with the effort. The soldiers continued to run deeper into the forest. Their frustrated shouts of “Where’d they go?” and “They’ve disappeared” overlapped with crushing steps and snapping branches.

“They can’t touch us,” Dárja said, as much to remind herself as to reassure Marnej. “Not as long as we stay within the Song of All.”

Marnej nodded, but his eyes were unfocused.

“Listen to the voices,” she urged him. “Call to them. They will protect us. They will guide us back to our kind.”

Marnej opened his mouth to speak but his words came out thick and slurred. Then Dárja heard him say, “Our kind.”