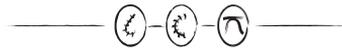


CHAPTER ONE



Below the bluff where Kaylo stood, small oddities peeled away the veneer of peace overlaying the forest. Figures darted through the trees in blurs of color. Sunlight glinted off the helm of a soldier. None of it had anything to do with Kaylo, but when the spirits screamed, their anguish broke open everything he had locked away. The past had returned, and the hiding—as all things did—had ended.

A young girl raced through a clearing back into the overgrown brush, two soldiers following close behind.

The scene fell silent beneath the ambient noise of the forest. Violence felt like it should announce itself with a bang, but the turns had taught him otherwise. Blood had ways of spilling in the quietest of moments.

Wisdom said to let the girl die. Kaylo hid from trouble for a reason.

Flashes of the girl broke through the trees, her ashen gray hair flaring out behind her before the forest swallowed her once again. Her cedar-brown complexion matched his own. Too few Tomakans roamed freely these days. Those who had survived lived under occupation or escaped into some dark corner of the countryside.

The soldiers ran through an outcropping moments after the girl. She had done an admirable job cutting through the dense wood, keeping distance between her and her attackers. But she was a child. The soldiers

would outlast her. Or she would trip. A myriad of things might happen, but no matter the details, in the end, they would spirit her away like so many before.

Kaylo stepped over the edge of the bluff before he admitted to himself what he was about to do. His foot sank into the loose soil below, and the steep slope of the land drove him down the hill, the summer breeze kissing his cheeks as he ran against its current.

In the moments it took to reach the base of the hill, Kaylo abandoned pretense. There would be consequences if he survived, and plenty of time to regret his decision, but the decision had been made.

At the base of the bluff, he skidded to a stop and shut his eyes to the world. Vision only served to distract the mind in times such as these.

Kenke Forest, his forest, spread out like a map in his mind—the proud ironoak trees and stubborn underbrush, the dark soil, the sloping hills, and the Sanine River that cut the forest in two. This land had sheltered him for a dozen turns. If he meant to catch his prey, he had to cut through the dense brush rather than go around it.

Without a second thought, he launched himself forward.

Rough roots and wild shrubs lashed against his exposed ankles, but the pain would make itself known later. His knee ached with an old wound, and his chest burned for lack of air. Though his ligaments strained, he was still young enough—or stubborn enough—to call on his strength.

At one time, he could have run blindfolded through the forest and still found his mark, but no longer. He had grown too comfortable and set in his ways. Trees jumped out in front of him. He bore down on the moment—the forest, and the earth—as he pushed the pain and judgments from his mind.

“Seed and Balance,” he muttered in repetition between heaving breaths, a mantra to his ancestor spirits.

The forest showed no signs of disturbance apart from an old set of animal tracks. Birds chirped. Wind rustled the trees. Everything carried on as it should.

He stopped.

In his rush to be the man he had been, he misjudged the path. The girl could have veered away in infinite directions. If he hadn't intercepted them by now, with all likelihood, the soldiers had caught their prey.

"Seed and Balance," he muttered again.

The Gousht no longer took prisoners, and Kaylo owned some measure of that change. Now the bastards cut strays open and hung them as warnings.

Kaylo closed his eyes to listen, and the spirits wailed. He whipped his head towards their cries, but before he could take in the sight, something slammed into his side.

Pain crawled along his ribs, back into his shoulder blade. His head rebounded off the ground as the child he meant to save tumbled over him. Dirt kicked up into a cloud, and they both lay groaning, sprawled out on the forest floor.

He should have listened to wisdom.

The dust settled, and the girl scrambled off the ground as soldiers broke through the trees. She made it to her feet as the taller of the two soldiers strode over and slammed his fist into her gut. The sounds of her coughing, gasping, and retching mixed together as she collapsed to the dirt.

Clad in green, padded armor, the soldiers loomed over their prey as they caught their breaths through self-assured smiles. The very image of Gousht soldiers—young, lean, and pale.

In their rush, they had yet to pay Kaylo any mind. The curve of his belt knife peeked out from beneath the dirt just beyond his reach and glinted in the sunlight. He shot his hand towards the weapon, like a man of lesser experience. Situations like these required patience.

The shorter soldier clamped her boot down on his wrist as his fingers brushed the knife's hilt. She leaned her weight over her foot as she bent down to pick up Kaylo's knife. His skin stretched, and his bones rebelled against the pressure until a small moan escaped his clenched teeth, and

the soldier eased up, like she had been waiting to hear his pain.

"Looks like the konki found a friend," the soldier said in Gousht, her accent thick and heavy.

Whoever decided to turn konki—a delicious fruit—into a slur, deserved a slit throat and a shallow grave. As a boy, Kaylo loved konki with its bright red flesh and thick brown husk. They must have thought themselves terribly clever.

The soldier removed her helm and wiped the sweat from her brow, letting her silver-white hair fall to her shoulders. She looked young. War hadn't had a chance to ugly her unblemished skin.

For all their reductive thinking, the Gousht didn't mind sending women to die in battle, not as long as they served as infantry and followed the orders of their assumed betters.

Her face twisted into a mask of exaggerated disgust. *"Ehh, this one is old and ragged. We should put him out of his misery."* The repulsive language slurred its consonants and elongated its vowels, like someone speaking with a full mouth.

She twisted Kaylo's blade in her hands. *"But he does have a nice knife."*

"Let me see that," the other soldier said, reaching for the blade. He held it to the light and admired the well-crafted tool before slipping it into his belt. *"A keepsake to remember you by, old man."*

Old? Kaylo thought.

The patches on his robes had overtaken the original thread long ago, he hadn't bathed in at least a span, and tendrils of his matted curls hung in front of his face, but none of that made him old. Thirty-four turns only counted as old to the young.

"You enjoy this too much, Kels," the second soldier playfully rebuked as he reached into the pouch at his waist. He appeared older than the first soldier, but only slightly, standing tall and proud, his pale skin glistening with sweat.

"Jauk, if we have to be in this shit-pile colony, we should enjoy ourselves." Her lips spread into a wide-mouthed grin.

The Empire loved this type of soldier—confident youth in love with power and violence, the type of person who bantered over death.

Jauk returned her grin as he pulled out a palm-sized crystal from his pouch. He flipped it back and forth in his hands, as if admiring the clarity of the perfect jewel, but something deeper than admiration flickered in his eyes. Hunger. His stance, his focus, his grip on the jewel spoke of a man who didn't just enjoy what was to come; he needed it.

The Tomakan girl squeezed her eyelids shut as if straining to hear something in the distance, a young dancer searching for The Song. A novice. Even the soldiers recognized what she was up to, dense as they were.

Kels kicked the girl in the side, and she broke into a second fit of coughing.

The soldier leaned over her victim. *"Your little lullaby is not going to save you. And look at what you did. Some old forest hermit is going to die because you ran."* Kels's smile widened. *"At least your parents were smart enough to stay put."*

Kels seized the collar of the girl's robe and dragged her towards an ironoak tree. The girl kicked at the dirt and cursed in common tongue, but it meant nothing to Kels. The soldier slammed the girl into the tree as if she weighed nothing, then bound her hands to the trunk.

The dancer's soft cries tore at Kaylo's shame, but rushing through moments like these was a good way to die a bad death. An opening would present itself.

With every passing second, Kaylo's reservations about killing these soldiers dissipated. As a rule, he valued life regardless of its trappings, but these green bastards deserved to meet their god.

If the soldiers had known who they had encountered or if they hadn't fallen as deeply into the lure of their small power, maybe they would have had a chance. Not likely, but maybe.

As they said in Tomak, the soldiers focused on the trees and got lost in the forest. Neither of them had given Kaylo a second glance since they

disarmed him. To them, he was an old, unarmed man in ragged clothes living in the forest.

Jauk stretched his arm out towards the girl as he clutched the crystal in his palm. The young dancer's eyes widened. She thrashed against her bindings to no avail. The beads on her braids rattled about like a child's toy as her wails carried into the emptiness of the forest.

As the crystal began to glow, the girl's back arched away from the tree trunk, she bared her teeth to the sky, and her screams pitched upward.

The soldiers were enthralled with their own power, the glowing stone reflecting in their pale blue eyes. It called to them, and the rest of the world fell silent behind it.

It took every remnant of Kaylo's lapsed discipline not to rush the soldiers. Time ran thin for the girl, but a wasted opportunity would mean both of their lives. Slowly—near silently—he crept towards the soldiers.

Jauk turned his head at the last moment, a moment too late.

Kaylo planted his foot behind Jauk's legs, reached across the front of his chest, and rotated, slamming the man to the ground and forcing the crown of his head to strike first.

The glowing crystal fell from his grip and tumbled into the dirt beside him.

Still clear. Still empty.

The girl stopped screaming. Kels squinted at Kaylo as if to test the truth of her eyes.

Unfortunately, her shock didn't last. She reached into her green padded armor and retrieved a dull red crystal, which hung from her neck. The color churned beneath the crystal's surface like a living thing. She raised her other arm towards Kaylo, and the crystal glowed a brilliant red.

The air in front of him shimmered before igniting and popping in a small explosion. He swerved from the heat.

Ten paces separated Kaylo from his target.

Light refracted through another pocket of air, then another, and

another. Kaylo veered to the side just before the air pockets burst in a succession of bright flashes.

When he looked up, Kels's wicked smile shined in the light of the crystal. Then he raised his hand into the air, and the light vanished.

Her smile disappeared with the crystal's light. She gripped the gemstone harder and stretched out her arm like she had before, but nothing happened. The crystal had gone clear. Her face contorted—almost comically—with confusion.

The air surrounding her shimmered, and realization dawned on her face. Her expression grew slack with horror as she whispered, "*Thief*." Then the air around her erupted in cascading explosions that sent her tumbling backward.

Jauk didn't waste any time once he regained his footing. The soldier clutched a tawny crystal and raised his free hand to the sky before slamming it to the ground in a dramatic gesture. The earth rippled and cracked.

For all the power they wielded, most Gousht didn't take the time to understand the spirits they controlled.

Kaylo simply stepped aside and reached into the air to grab something no one else could see, and the ground steadied.

The green bastards always looked confused when Kaylo took away their toys. Jauk gripped the jewel tighter and desperately stomped his feet, but the earth remained still.

Why do they always think that will work? Kaylo thought as he approached the soldier slowly, but with purpose.

As soon as he was close enough, Kaylo lunged forward and jabbed Jauk in the throat. The soldier fell to his knees, coughing, his hand clutching his crystal rather than the hilt of his sword. Kaylo pulled his purloined knife from the soldier's belt and plunged the blade into his quilted armor. The layered fabric resisted Kaylo's knife and then gave way to the force.

Without malice or righteousness, Kaylo gripped the back of the

soldier's tunic and lowered the dying man to the forest floor.

His work was not finished.

The young dancer's gaze followed Kaylo as he walked past her to finish off the other soldier. Her mouth hung agape. He must have been a fearsome sight, ragged and covered in blood.

He shook his head and muttered, "Seed and Balance." This wasn't the person he wanted to be, not anymore.

Kels moaned and kicked her feet into the dirt, pushing herself farther from Kaylo. The flames had scorched her pale skin red, black, and gray, yet she still clung to life. He bent down and held her in place as she begged for mercy. Then he offered what little mercy he had for her with a quick death as he thrust the blade between her ribs into her heart.

He had not always been such a capable killer, but as with most things in life, his skill had grown with time and experience. His blade slid free of her wound, and blood followed, turning her green uniform brown.

Kaylo wiped his blade on the Emperor's seal stitched onto the dead soldier's armor—the serpent strangling the lion, now covered in blood. He sheathed his knife and went about gathering the crystals, including the stone that had fallen from Jauk's hand.

The stones rattled against each other in his cradled arms. He closed his eyes and listened until he found what he needed. The young dancer gasped as the crystals turned to dust and fell through Kaylo's arms like sand, the colors trapped within dispersing into the air. She had probably never seen anyone destroy a spirit crystal before. Few had.

Killing came easily, but now he had to deal with this stray Tomakan girl.

A red streak of blood ran from a cut on her forehead, accenting her brown skin. She was young. Twelve turns, maybe fourteen, no more. Her lavender and green robes hung loose, tied at the waist over a pair of homespun pants. Despite the dirt and ripped fabric, her clothing bore the signs of his people.

Her bottom lip stuck out and quivered with the rise and fall of her

chest. She would never forget today. It would define her as all his violent days had defined him.

There was nothing he could do about that now, but he could free her.

He approached her as he would a startled animal, with a slow gait and averted eyes. She yanked against her bindings, looking back and forth as if searching for an escape.

“What is your name?” he asked with as gentle of a voice as he could find.

The girl continued to struggle against her bindings, saying nothing.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” He bent down to untie the rope lashed around the girl’s wrists. A knife would have been quicker, but she probably wouldn’t have reacted well to him brandishing a blade this close to her.

“Is there anyone else chasing you?” he asked.

The girl remained quiet.

He adjusted his ragged robes, knelt to her level, and placed his hand on her shoulder. “I won’t force you to answer. But for both of our safety, is anyone else chasing you?”

She shook her head.

With one last jerking motion, he freed her of the rope. “There you go. That’s better. Do you have somewhere to go? Is there anywhere I can take you? Where is your family?”

The girl shook her head, tears streaming down her face. He met her eyes. Trauma changed a person in ways varied and unpredictable, but it always settled in the eyes.

She shook her head again, and her beaded braids clattered against the tree behind her. Cries erupted from her lungs before she threw her body against Kaylo’s chest. He flinched as she clutched him tighter.

After twelve turns without touching another person, this little girl sought comfort in his arms, arms covered in blood and gore. He hesitated for a breath or two. This wouldn’t end well. People met poor ends when they lingered in his company.

Yet again, his nature overtook his wisdom, and he wrapped his arms around the girl as she sobbed into his shoulder.

“Family knows,” he whispered, holding her until she gave into sleep.

Hopefully, her dreams would allow her to escape for a few hours. She had learned too much about the nature of The Waking today. The land of the living was a wicked place, and she deserved a space to hide from it, even if only for a short time.