

CHAPTER 11

Lome returned to the small camp they had set up with three brown wood shrews slung over his shoulder.

"Juna!" he called, looking around. "Juna, where are you?"

"Over here, Lome!" she called back. He dropped his bow into the cart and went to where she was kneeling.

"I thought you were going to start a fire?"

"Well, I couldn't pass up a fine opportunity to look for new herbs! I've never been out this far before. Here, look," she said and opened her bag revealing a whole pile of plants.

"Well, that's great and all," he said looking to the pile of herbs already on the cart. "But it would have been nice to already have a fire going."

"Relax," said Juna. "It won't take very long. These herbs will come in handy for us."

"At least we don't have to worry about her," Lome chuckled, motioning to Momma E. The old goat was licking a lichen from the stump of an old tree. *Old, lazy goat.* thought Lome and wondered what Momma E would be doing otherwise in her pen. He looked to Juna. "Do you ever wonder where you're meant to be?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we both grew up in Thurlow, I herd goats and you weave, but other people showed us these things and told us to do them. What if my mother hadn't have brought me there? Do you think we'd be doing something different if we grew up somewhere else?"

"Well of course, but we didn't," Juna said, "except I think no matter where I was or what I was supposed to be doing, I'd still have the same interests. I think we're born with a certain disposition for things. You can speculate all you want about what you could have been, but the fact is you haven't been them."

"Oh, let me dream, Juna."

"I'm simply stating the facts. I think dreams are a waste of time."

"I know what you think, I'm only asking *what if* we were born somewhere else. Do you think I'd be more like Artulo if I were Hartha's son, or would I still be like me? Would we still know each other?"

"Well in that case, maybe not," replied Juna. She sat up and looked at Lome. "I think you would be stuck up like Artulo and I would be following him through a forest instead."

Lome grabbed a bunch of leaves and threw it at Juna's face and she returned the gesture. Together they laughed.

They spent their first night in the forest on mattresses of leaves and goatskins. They shared dried bread and Juna added some bitter herbs to the shrew stew they cooked over a small fire, saying that it would help them sleep during the night.

Nearly a fortnight passed as they travelled deeper into the forest, still with no sign of a path or clues to Lome's mother, but one morning, Lome woke with a start.

"Ow!" Lome pulled away, as the goat was pulling his hair with her teeth. "What's wrong with you, Momma E?" Lome pushed her head away, but heard her whimpering. He turned to go back to sleep, but felt the presence of something creep close.

He sat up immediately and looked around. It was dawn and little light penetrated the deep woods. He saw them immediately, two eyes creeping low behind the trees. Lome could hear Juna's soft breath behind him. He could also hear the low panting of the animal in front. The unblinking grey eyes slunk towards the ground and Lome knew the animal was ready to pounce. He glanced to the cart where his bow lay, a few strides away. He wouldn't be able to grab it in time. *The dagger*, he thought. It was in his bag, which lay beside him. Slowly he reached into his bag, his fingers touching something cold. He brought it out and held onto it tightly, but the object turned out to be his mother's pendant. Of course, the dagger was in its sheath.

The wolf raised one clawed paw at a time, edging forward ever so slowly. Its body shook all over slightly as if it was trying to gain control of itself. Again Lome felt around inside his bag, not taking his eyes from the wolf. His hand brushed something soft, the bearskin sheath. The moment Lome grasped the handle, the animal jumped. Lome rolled over just as the wolf landed where he had lain and bumped right into Juna.

"Hey!" Juna woke abruptly. "A simple tap on the—"

The wolf convulsed vigorously on the ground, a deathly bark came from its throat. Lome grabbed Juna and pushed her behind him as he backed away from the shaking animal, his father's dagger at the ready. He hardly knew what he was doing. He had never encountered a wolf this close before. It looked as if it were being strangled, but a moment later it jumped up again and refocused on him, saliva dripping from its jaws.

Lome's mind raced through all the things his father had said about wolves. "Wolves are timid around humans, the only danger a wolf is to you is it scaring the game." This was the largest wolf Lome had ever seen and it certainly wasn't timid. Would he meet the same fate as his father now? What would people say back in Thurlow? "Poor Lome, went to find his mother

and died the very next day." And there was Juna too, he would be held responsible for her. He couldn't let anything happen to her.

"Juna, don't move," he said. "Stay as still as possible!"

He locked eyes with the wolf again. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead as he tried to recall what his father had taught him about hunting. *Focus, Lome*, he knew he would say. *Focus to clear your mind of all fear and you'll know what to do.* He crouched low, poised to strike and tightened his grip, but felt a sharp pain in his palm from the teeth of the dagger's jaw.

The wolf continued its crazed stare, its grey unblinking eyes fixed upon his hand, where he held his mother's pendant still. It was as if the wolf had come looking for the pendant. For some reason he had thought to hang on to it, clutching it just as tightly as he did the dagger. *Focus!* He tried to clear his mind and put all his attention on the wolf's movements as the two circled slowly. *Focus!* Lome felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Everything came to a stop around him. He looked to the pendant and could swear that for a moment it glowed a soft blue. He was fully awake, this couldn't be a trick of his tired mind. His pendant remained blue and he felt as though he had been thrown under water as the atmosphere around him became slow. He was highly aware of everything, the leaves on the trees, the moss under his feet, the wolf...

It sprang. A hairy mess of teeth and claws flew towards him through the air.

The obsidian knife flew from his hand as Lome fell backwards. Everything was happening all over again. The shrew, the bear, his father... ZING.

Momma E screamed in her shrill goat voice.

Something cut through the air from behind Lome just above his head and the wolf was on him.

"Lome!" cried Juna.

He felt the huge body of the wolf writhing frantically on top of him. One of its massive paws swiped his cheek. But that was all. A few moments passed and the wolf stopped moving all together.

"Lome!" screamed Juna again. He felt something hard like metal at the wolf's neck and pushed with all his strength. The huge hairy mass rolled off onto its side. An arrow lay halfway in the wolf's open mouth, its point dripping out of the other side of the wolf's skull.

Juna shrieked with relief as she threw herself on him. They both fell back onto the ground.

"I thought it had killed you!" she said. She sat up and put her hand to Lome's face where it hurt. She brought it away and Lome could see it was red with blood.

"You're bleeding," she said looking at him,

"Thanks," said Lome sarcastically.

"Don't move," she said and ran over to the cart. Momma E had returned to sitting casually on the ground, munching some frogstools as if nothing had happened.

In a few moments, Juna had ripped some strips from her woven cloth and dampened them with water. She brought them to his cheek and delicately cleaned the gashes.

"Hold still, this is going to sting," she said and took a bottle from her bag. She opened it and dabbed a new clean cloth against it before pressing it to his wounds.

"I didn't know you could use a bow," said Lome.

"I didn't either, but I came to protect you, remember?"

"Juna, I've been hunting with my father for years and you just pick up a bow and that's it?"

"I did what I had to do!" she smiled. "You know I read a lot, maybe I've read about archery," she said smugly. Lome felt embarrassed, but smiled back. "Stay here and hold it to your face," she said. "I'm going to search for some herbs."

"Juna, it's dangerous! There could be more wolves around!"

"I'll take your bow!" she replied and ran off into the woods before he could stop her. Lome didn't know what to do. He lay back and stared up at the trees, waiting anxiously while holding the cloth to his cheek.

"Oh, get off!" he said as Momma E started licking his hand. "You have to warn me again if another wolf comes," he said.

"Mah-ah-ah," she bleated and trotted over to a log and lay her head of it, blowing at a caterpillar.

Juna's my responsibility, Lome thought, feeling guilty. He looked to the wolf - a huge mass of dark matted fur. What if the wolf had gone after her instead? It reminded him too much of the accident which killed his father and he shuddered with guilt. What would I have done? I have to protect her from now on no matter what.

Juna returned not long after to Lome's relief. He watched as she started a fire and boiled some knobs, stirring in some white and yellow flowers. She poured the mixture into a cup and brought it up to Lome's face. It smelled revolting.

"Drink," she said. "Oak gall and chamomile. You'll have scars for sure judging how deep the cuts are, but this will help with the bleeding."

Lome looked into the cup and saw his reflection. Three slits ran down the right side of his face. He winced and took a deep gulp. It was worse than it smelled.

He lay back down on the goatskin blankets, holding the cloth to his face and staring up at the trees. The broth made his head feel a bit light.

"Did you see my pendant?" Lome asked. "I could've sworn it was glowing... the stone was blue."

Juna shook her head and went to crouch by the wolf, trailing her fingers through its grey fur. Lome was sure the stone had glowed, just like it had under the apple tree. He'd never seen anything like it happen before. He held it in his hands, but it was just a dull white stone now.

"It's an Ash Wolf," said Juna

"You sure?" asked Lome, sitting up. "What on earth is it doing here? And alone too? They live in packs far north don't they?"

"I don't know, it is a bit strange... What's even stranger is this." Juna parted the wolf's fur to show a thick iron collar around its neck.

"Who can tame a wolf?" asked Lome.

"It wasn't very tame. Maybe it escaped somehow? But from where? Who would keep a wolf?"

"Or it was let loose. What if it was driven here for some reason?" Lome said. "It was looking at my hand. At my mother's pendant."

"You said Artulo was after it too. You're thinking too much about it. Here, let me switch your cloth."

Lome couldn't shake the thought that the wolf had targeted him, or why it was wearing a collar. "Mother Elanoris told me to keep it a secret." Juna didn't reply as she finished caring for his cheek. "She also said that there's some magic left in the world. Have you ever heard of the Moon?"

"Yeah, just an old story my mother used to tell me to help me sleep," replied Juna, brushing it off. She laid her head on top of the wolf's and closed her eyes as if trying to listen to its thoughts.

"Do you think it's true? That there used to be a big light in the night sky?"

"Seems silly to me," replied Juna. "The sun is already a big light in the sky. Another one would make night as bright as day."

"Yeah," replied Lome. He thought about growing up without a mother. Maybe his would have told him more about the Moon when he was younger too. He looked at Juna, her long messy braids lying on the wolf's greyish fur. "Let me skin it for you," he said finally, "make it into a cloak."

"Okay," she said.

Lome spent all morning skinning the wolf. He made a lattice from branches and stretched the fur over it as his father had taught him. The whole while, Momma E slept under a tree. Juna maintained the fire and roasted some of the wolf meat for lunch.

"Do you think my mother came this way," he said.

"It's possible. Though it's more likely that she came from Siango and then got lost, taking a detour through here."

"Seems unlikely," replied Lome. "We're so far off path from Siango."

"We could take a detour and ask around if you like."

"I want to keep going north," replied Lome. "No one ever comes to this part of the forest for a reason. There has to be something this way."

When they had both had their fill, they packed up camp and untied Momma E to begin their trek again.

"Ash Wolves live north, right?" Lome asked.

"Right," Juna replied

He drew his bow and kept it at the ready.

CHAPTER 12

Lome and Juna travelled further through the woods without much happening. Lome kept holding his pendant expecting it to glow again, but it didn't. He'd tried mentioning it to Juna, but she always brushed it off as nothing. They talked more about why the wolf had a collar, but let the topic drop after they couldn't come to a logical conclusion.

The only trouble they came upon was when Momma E, pulling their car, spotted a particularly large frogstool and bounded over a rock to reach it. The cracked cart wheel split down the middle and Lome had to use some vines to hold the two pieces in place. Juna also started wearing her wolf cape when it had dried. She let the wolf's paws hang in front of her shoulders as the wolf's head sat atop hers. He messy bangs showed beneath its nose and her braids hung below its nasty teeth. It looked completely natural on her, even fitting, thought Lome. He wore his bow slung around his shoulder ever since the morning of the wolf, but hadn't used it except to bring in more wood shrews, which were fat and tasty so late in the season. His wounds were also healing rapidly thanks to Juna's concoction, though they left scars on his face.

Then the forest changed. The trees became thinner and the floor was carpeted in dead leaves, which crumpled beneath their feet. It was as if they passed an invisible barrier between a lush, growing forest, and a decaying one. Even Momma E had become ten times more difficult, which Lome didn't even think was possible. Before she had been a breeze to manage compared to the stubbornness she professed now. She had to be dragged half the time now.

"I've been looking out for some beryl bromwort for you Lome, it works well on scars, but it doesn't look like it grows anywhere around here," said Juna. "Actually, it doesn't look like much at all grows anymore. The ground is turning greyer and greyer as we walk further north. We'd have to go back to my garden in Thurlow if we wanted—"

"Shhh, Juna. Quiet for a moment, do you hear that?"

"Huh? I don't hear anything," said Juna. "I think you're just overreacting. The wolf was an anomaly, we haven't seen anything bigger than a rabbit since. Have you spotted any plants?"

"Shhh, quiet for a moment, I don't care about your little plants," said Lome. Momma E sat down and filled her mouth with dead leaves, but spit them out with a snort.

"Lome, I don't hear anything," said Juna sharply.

"*Exactly*, I haven't heard a bird chirp in ages. Not even a rustling of wind in the trees." Lome picked up stone and threw it into the distance. A little later they heard an echoing knock as the stone hit a tree and bounced onto a bed of dead leaves.

"Listen," said Lome.

"I don't think there is anything out this way. We've been travelling for days and come across no sign of anything that would tell of an establishment or people having been here. This forest goes on forever."

"It's buzzing," said Lome as he strained his ears to pick up the low noise.

"What's buzzing?"

"If you would be quiet for two seconds, Juna."

"Fine," she said and they both stood motionless.

"I... I hear it too now, buzzing, but what is it?"

They waited in silence a little longer.

"No birds or wind or insects or anything... just a really low buzz. It's as if there's no sound left out here. I think it's the noise of nothing."

"Nothing doesn't have a noise," replied Juna.

"Well, nothing is making a noise, so what am I hearing?"

"I don't know, we haven't found out yet. Everything has an explanation. Given enough time and study, a proper answer always emerges," Juna said matter-of-factly.

"Come on," retorted Lome. "Let's keep going. I have a feeling we'll find something about my mother soon."

"We've been walking further than she could have ran without supplies."

"She didn't come with anything but me," replied Lome.

They walked further through the forest and it became even stranger and more desolate. The once-sturdy trunks looked brittle and the air was dry to breathe. Lome and Juna began to argue about little things and Momma E became especially difficult to drag onward. Finally, when darkness started to fall and it was clear that Momma E would go no further they decided to make camp and eat.

"Perhaps it's best to still tie Momma E up, even though I don't think the Old Mother will be wondering anywhere," said Juna.

"I'll take care of it, it's my turn anyways." Lome dragged Momma E over to a large tree and began to wrap the rope from her neck around the trunk.

"Ugh! Look!" Lome said holding up his hands. After touching the tree, they were black. "What's wrong with this place?"

"There must have been a fire here," said Juna, unpacking their goatskin blankets and setting them on the dusty ground. "It would explain all this soot."

"Seems more like the trees are wasting away," said Lome. "They're all dead! It's as if they've been sucked dry. Everything here is dead!"

"Either way, I'd like to get out of this forest. Siango mustn't be that far off west from where we are now."

"*Again with Siango*," Lome grunted and finished tying up Momma E, who lay grumpily on the ground. "It's like you don't even want to be here."

"Poor girl," said Juna, ignoring Lome's comment. "She hasn't had anything to eat lately with this whole forest being dead."

Lome returned to Juna's side and broke a piece of stale bread to share with her. He tossed some crumbs at the goat. Instantly Momma E perked her ears and became livelier. She stood and trotted over to the piece of bread, which lay just out of reach of her bite.

"Haha, look at her," said Lome and he tossed another piece just out of the goat's reach.

"Stop teasing her," said Juna. "She's tired and hungry, let her rest."

"Oh, she's fine," replied Lome, surprised himself at the spitefulness of his actions, but he found it hardly fitting for Juna to tell him how to treat goats. In fact her saying that annoyed him more than it should have. The noise of nothing buzzed in his ears and he felt inexplicably hostile towards everything. He tossed another crumb out of the goat's reach, her eyes nearly popping out of her head as she pulled against the rope tied around her throat, reaching out with her long, quivering tongue. There was loud snap followed by a long moan. The trunk that Momma E was tied to cracked at its base and the tree split up the centre.

Lome jumped in shock as the entire tree fell apart. Branches rained down and crashed to the ground in a mighty burst of soot. The large trunk tipped and fell forward, splitting into

segments which turned to dust as they hit the forest floor. Soon the great tree that had once stood a hundred feet high became a pile of soot, covering everything around it. Lome coughed and cleared the ash-like dust from his face. Grey flakes were settling everywhere, like soft snow.

"Juna!" he yelled and reached down into the pile of ash beside him, grabbing her arm and pulling her up.

"I'm all right," Juna coughed, wiping her face with her sleeves. "Go see what happened to Momma E"

Lome ran over to where the goat had been tied and swept away mounds of ash with his arms.

"Ha!" he called. "Looks like she got her bread crumbs. She's grey as old Mother Elanoris' hair, but couldn't be happier."

They moved their small camp and brushed off their things as best they could. Lome carefully broke some branches of other trees further on, and found that they were just as brittle. Finally they decided it was pointless to try and tie up the goat, she eventually refused to budge an inch anyway. Exhausted, they brought out the goatskin blankets once again and sat down to eat. Soon they had a little fire burning and Juna pulled out her leather sack to add some herbs to their stew.

"Oh, not these too! Lome, take a look what's happened," Juna said. The plants were withered and crumpled when she picked them up. She dumped her sac upside down and a cloud of grey dust fell out into a pile. "I can't believe it! All these fine specimens now dust! This air is so dry."

"Juna, look," said Lome, pointing to something sticking out of the pile. Juna plucked out a yellow sprout from the dust.

"Strange," she said, "it's as if I just collected them, they haven't wilted at all."

"Remember my mother's grave?" said Lome, "Wasn't it odd how grey the ground was around it? It was as if all the life were sucked out of everything there too. I think it has something to do with her death or what happened to her. Whatever it was, I think we're headed straight towards it. I know we're going to find it."

"Something can't have the life sucked out of it, but I don't think it was a fire anymore. The trees would be charcoal, not towers of dust. I have no idea what could be causing this. It's no disease in my opinion. Perhaps it simply hasn't rained here in ages? The air here is very dry."

"It's almost as if this place has been cursed. If the whole forest is becoming like this, no wonder my father had such a hard time bringing back game, there aren't any animals left here."

"Whatever it is, there's always a logical explanation."

Lome wanted to change the subject; he didn't like arguing with Juna. They had shared nothing but small talk and arguments since the forest changed. The noise of nothing continued to buzz in his ears. "You know," he said, staring off into the grey landscape. "I think I've seen those yellow plants somewhere before... When I went to get you mudroot, Hartha hid a bundle of them behind his back."

"I've been all over the forest around Thurlow, yet never as far as your mother's grave, and that's the only place I've ever seen them."

"Why would he be visiting my mother's grave?" asked Lome. "And why would he pick those plants and keep them?"

"Do you think he knew her before she died?" said Juna, lying down on the goatskin blankets.

"It's possible, but why wouldn't he have told me?"

"Maybe he didn't want you to know."

"Maybe," said Lome, watching the setting sun slowly disappear. While everything around him was grey, the sky was still vivid shades of violet and blue folding into the black of night. The stars emerged and spelled out patterns and shapes of untold stories a million miles away and Lome wondered what his story was.

"Juna, this buzzing noise is driving me nuts." Lome looked over at her. He could just make out her profile from the flames of their dying fire. Her messy braids lay over her ears as usual and she was still wearing her wolf cape, its muzzle staring up at the stars just as she was. She didn't say anything in reply, but began to hum. Lome didn't know if he had heard the tune before. It didn't seem familiar to him at all, but it reminded him of golden wheat and green pastures and old apple trees and thatched roofs. It helped block out the noise of nothing and reminded him of home. He wondered what that word even meant to him now as he lay down, holding his mother's pendant tightly to his chest.

As he fell asleep, Lome felt like he was being lowered and a faint vision of a moving platform appeared in his mind. Immediately he sat up and blinked, blinded by a sudden light. He shielded his eyes until they adjusted, but couldn't see anything, or anybody for that matter. Everything was white. He looked down and saw that he wore grey clothes. Even his hands and arms were grey, just like the dust that covered the forest.

"Juna?" he called suddenly panicked.

"Calm down," said a voice

CHAPTER 13

"Hello?" Lome said. The voice had come from behind him. He turned around and saw a figure seated a few yards from him.

"Hello?" Lome called again, cautious he stayed where he stood. The man's hunched body was draped in robes, which were grey too. He had his back turned to Lome, but Lome could see that he had a long beard which reached down to the ground. "Hello? Where's Juna? And what happened to the forest? Did you bring me here? Let me go!"

Lome's words gained the man's attention and he turned to look at Lome revealing a youthful face. It was as if Lome were looking into the face of a man at every stage of his life, from birth until death, but all at the same time and in the same moment. He couldn't grasp how a man could look young and old, as an infant and elderly at the same time, yet that was the face that looked back at him. It was grey too, just like everything else, except he had blue eyes. The young-old man's face twisted into surprise as he looked up and down Lome. At last he spoke.

"So young and already you've gained control?" he said under his breath, more to himself than to Lome. The surprise faded and the old-young man turned again to his original posture.

"Uhh, hello?" said Lome becoming angry. "Answer me! Why did you bring me here?"

The old-young man sighed. "You came here yourself. I told you to calm down," he muttered. Lome wasn't sure what to think, but found himself in no immediate danger.

"Where am I? Why is it so white here?"

"It's not *white here*, it's *nothing here*."

"It's white," replied Lome. "All I can see is white. There's no ground, no sky, no nothing here. It's just white!"

"You're talking about nothing," said the old-young man. "You're looking at nothing."

Lome rolled his eyes. "Okay, well then where am I?"

The young-old man turned to face him. "Many ask that question. This is the second time you've asked it. Are you so desperate to learn this answer over the answer of other questions? No one was around to ask when I first came here, I barely know where this is myself."

"Am I dreaming?" asked Lome.

"You might say that. But a more correct response is that you are in a space of nothing. A pure void. Your body may be sleeping, but your mind is here and here is quite real."

The young-old man, then turned back to his hunched position and remained silent for a long time. Lome was still bewildered at how the man appeared ancient, yet youthful at the same time and his responses weren't making any sense.

"Well? Who are you?" Lome finally asked.

"You have a great impatience," replied the man with irritation, looking at Lome with his piercing blue eyes. "Do you think I should be required to answer everything? I've recorded in my memory what you look like, a plain face, plainer than most I conclude. Of average ambition I am sure. Not more selfless than the rest no doubt. To what extent do you think answering questions further entertains me? I assure you, I don't consider you to be of any use."

Lome frowned, not sure what he meant. "You clearly know where this is, can't you just tell me? You're the only one here to ask." He looked around in all directions, bright white everywhere.

The old-young man sighed. "Very well," he said. "This is a place of no time, just instants. You either are here or you aren't. How long you stay isn't subject to time either, rather you exist

here or you don't. I have been here a long time you might say, but really, I have been here for all time and no time at all. I remain within the instant. I have seen many people come and go, yet they all came and went at the same time. Just as you yourself are here now, so is everyone that ever came to this place."

"I don't see anyone else here,"

"It's because they can't come here while you are here."

"That doesn't make sense. Then they're not here at the same time I am."

"I hardly care to keep explaining things."

All this was making Lome's head spin in confusion, so he thought he'd try a different question. "Can you tell me what has happened to the forest?"

"There are few things I do not know," answered the young-old man. "And most answers I do not find pleasing to reveal. I think you have had your fill of answers. I tire of this."

"The trees," said Lome, "have all turned to dust, and the ground is dry and cracked."

The old-young man would not reply and when Lome realized he would gain no further answers, he sat down with his head in his hands trying to contemplate everything.

Perhaps the entire forest had wasted away, he thought. And this is all that's left.

CHAPTER 14

Lome felt something wet on his face. He sprang up, and realized he was back in the forest. Instinctively he reached for his bow. Juna laughed. Momma E was licking crumbs off his nose. "Relax, Lome!" she said.

Now that he was awake again, the events of his dream were quickly becoming lost to him, wisping away. He thought of telling Juna, but she never cared much for anything fantastical in nature, besides, it was just a dream anyway.

"Watch it, Juna!" Lome snapped, "What if there was another wolf? I could have hurt you!" He didn't know why, but he felt very agitated and Juna was just making it worse.

"Yeah, just like last time," she said sarcastically, lifting the wolf's muzzle over her head, its ears perking outwards.

Lome became even angrier that she was teasing him when he was trying to be serious. This was his journey after all. It was his decision to find his roots and here she was playing games.

"I'm going to get some breakfast," he said, walking over to the cart and slinging his bow around his shoulder.

"Lome, there's nothing here. Let's just go."

"I'll be back."

Lome stamped off in the fog that had settled from the night before. He knew they hadn't seen any wildlife around since the forest turned grey, not even a bird hopping amongst the brittle canopy, but he just needed some time to vent. He went off a little ways and practiced shooting

arrows into branches, watching as they exploded into soot on impact. When he felt a little better he returned to their small camp.

“Feeling better?” said Juna, handing him a piece of bread. She had packed their things in the mean time.

“Yeah.”

Lome broke off a corner of bread and put it into his mouth.

“Ugh,” he said. The bread was so dry and crumbly that he spit it out.

“I know,” said Juna, “but it’s all we’ve got. We’re not going to be able to go much further if we don’t find something to eat.”

“Come on,” said Lome. “Let’s keep going.”

The fog was like a grey broth covering everything. Lome and Juna had to be extra cautious after Momma E bumped into a trunk again, causing another ash explosion. As they walked, the trees started to become less dense and it was easier to avoid them. The ground was also more dry and cracked. Mounds of dust sat where trees once stood tall. By mid day the sun had dispersed most of the fog and they could see clearly into the distance.

"There's nothing ahead," said Juna. "The land is completely barren as far as I can see. Maybe we should divert our path? I bet we're due west of Siango."

"Hartha warned me not to come north," said Lome. "He told me to stay away and go south instead."

"Maybe he knew there'd be nothing out here. Besides, we're running out of food," Juna continued. "We can't feed ourselves on dust, let alone Momma E."

"Fine," muttered Lome. "But only a short detour, just enough to restock." Lome couldn't help but look to Juna's hood. If there was nothing north, where could the Ash Wolf have come from? There must be something far off on their path.

"Good." Juna twirled on one foot and started walking to the right, eastwise judging by the sun. "I don't think there's anything out there. How do you know for sure your mother came this way?"

"I don't," said Lome. She was getting on his nerves again.

"Well, when we get to Siango, we'll ask around. I don't think anyone will remember much from that long ago, but it's worth a shot. There may still be some stories lingering that may give us a clue. Or at least they might know about this forest. It's strange enough that everything is dying. We'll go back to Thurlow afterwards and spread the word to everyone of what we've learned. Maybe we'll find your answer there and then be back home before we know it."

"You've wanted to go to Siango all along!" Lome said more harshly than he would have liked to. It was as if the desolation of their surroundings was having a real impression on him. "I didn't ask you to come!" He bit his tongue, suddenly remembering how she had saved his life earlier.

Juna kept walking, but glanced back at Lome with a frown. "Maybe your answers will be written in a big pile of dust!"

They continued walking east along the forest edge for the entire day, even Momma E was silent. They refrained from speaking to each other because every word resulted in argument. Their lack of food didn't help the situation either. When night fell, they made camp, but neither slept hardly a wink.

By late afternoon the next day, dead grass reappear from the dry ground and faded into a shade of fresh green. It was a strange, but Lome felt much happier. All his tensions towards Juna drifted away and he felt refreshed. He hardly even remembered why they had argued and soon the two were chatting heartily again.

"Juna, wait," said Lome. "Listen, do you hear anything?"

They both stopped walking.

"No."

"Exactly," replied Lome. "I don't hear anything, it's completely quiet. Before, there was the buzz. I can't hear anything now." The quiet was suddenly broken as a sparrow dived right in front of them, fluttering up just before it reached the ground. Ahead lay a beautiful meadow of green and yellow below a blue sky dotted with drifting wisps of snow white clouds. A gentle breeze swept through the grass and Lome enjoyed the coolness of its touch on his face. He looked over his shoulder and saw nothing but grey. The buzz had gone and was replaced with the sound of everything happening, the sound of the grass, and the sky, the sound of life.

"Well, I'm certainly glad it's gone. It's such a relief to not hear it anymore. An effect from the dry atmosphere probably. I'd be happy if I never heard it again," said Juna.

"Me too," said Lome. He didn't even mind that she'd brought up her dry atmosphere argument. "I think that dead forest was having an effect on us. I was so mad back there, but now I feel just fine."

"Look, I can see Siango," Juna said. "It's much taller than I thought it would be!"

Lome looked out over the rolling yellow meadows and could see tall red towers standing up in the distance. Even further out, a black cloud loomed in the sky, edging its way forward.

The Lost Histories of the Moon Part II

In those final seconds, a black veil of shadow inched over the Moon as the planets drew together. The people faced the King's palace in bewildered amazement. The King himself sat upon his throne as the darkness crept down from his face, slowly to his neck and then his chest. At the right moment, the Mage Technicians activated the device and placed it over his heart as it drew on the foretold power of the alignment.

The people of the Moon held their breath. In the darkness, the device pulled forth a thread of light from the sun. The pin of light grew over the King's heart as the device pulled more and more from the sun. In a swelling instant, it exploded with bright light which pushed through the palace, expelled the darkness like a crashing wave. Pillars crumbled and the walls blew away. The Mage Technicians were killed instantly and those facing the palace were blinded. For an instant in time, or perhaps for no time at all, the device filled the Moon with light as bright as the sun and shattered the tie between the King's body and mortal soul.

CHAPTER 15

"We're nearly there," said Lome. The fresh atmosphere was lightening his spirits. Even Momma E was much more lively, enough so that she agreed to pull the cart even with Juna resting in the back. "We should be there by sunset. We can stay the night, restock and head back on the northward path by morning."

Siango was an old settlement, originally a trading post, but now a thriving community. Though small, well under a thousand people, Siango was known for its large market which could triple its population on a good day from traveling merchants and buyers alike. Instead of building outwards to accommodate its habitants, Siango had built upwards so that the thin houses rose higher and higher into the air, new layers built atop older ones—quite frightening on a particularly windy day. For some reason, most of the buildings were a vibrant shade of red, a stark contrast to the yellow meadow it stood on. From afar, the tall, red, crowded shape of the buildings gave the appearance of large figure standing in the middle of the meadow.

Juna had tired of walking and was sitting with her feet dragging from the back of the cart as Momma E pulled, examining the yellow stemmed plants she had gathered previously and humming to herself. She turned to look ahead and saw the tall, red town come into view herself.

"So it seems," she said. "It will be nice to have a hot bath and a warm bed again. Together they hurried their pace, but suddenly Momma E objected with a stubborn bleat.

"Come on, you old goat!" said Lome, encouraging her with a tug at her rope, but she refused to budge. She spat out her tongue and began to munch the grass by her chin.

"Ugh." Lome wiped his hands of her slobber.

"Why don't we stop for a bit, let Momma E fill her stomach?"

"Yeah," replied Lome feeling sympathy for the goat. "It doesn't look like she's going anywhere right now—she hasn't had anything to eat since the forest dried up. Still, we should hurry on our way. I'm starving!"

He unhitched the old goat from the cart. She gave a bleat of thanks and she gobbled up the grass within the radius of her lanky neck.

"I wish I found grass as appetizing as she does," said Lome, his stomach rumbling.

"I just started studying these," said Juna. "I tried to look at them while we were in the dead part of the forest, but I couldn't focus. I was so agitated for some reason."

Lome thought again about how mad he'd been without reason.

"I haven't seen anything like them before," continued Juna. "They're quite strange. Here, feel this." She took one stem and plucked the round leaf from it. A drop of milk started to gather at its end and when it became heavy, dripped onto Lome's hand. Immediately he felt a strong tingling sensation and pulled his hand away, rubbing it. "Hey! What are you doing? It's poisonous!"

"Feels like needles, eh? I don't think it's poisonous, but curious, isn't it?" Juna said, laughing at Lome's overreaction. "Now watch this." Juna carefully pulled one of the dried, crumpled herbs from her sack and placed it gently in her palm. "My herbs had completely dried up, like the trees in the dead forest. I've concluded that it was due to the arid atmosphere. They all died, except for these sprouts, which have retained their moisture quite well."

With the crumpled leaf in one palm she pinched the yellow sprout at its tip and a little more of the milk formed. This time, she let it drop onto the leaf. Slowly, the leaf turned green where the milk touched. "I've never seen or heard of anything like it," she said.

"I've never seen or heard of anything like it either!" Lome said mimicking her with a smile. Juna frowned at him and threw the crumpled leaf in his face. Lome couldn't help but laugh. He knew absolutely nothing about plants except that they usually tasted bad, but he agreed to himself that this was rather strange.

Lome lay down on the grass beside Juna, who was running her fingers through the green blades and stared up at the billowing clouds. All the hostility he felt in the dead forest had left him and the colours of the life surrounding him again refreshed his eyes. He was happy they were on good terms again.

"Let's get going," said Juna. "Momma E looks happy now and I don't want to waste my night here. I can't wait for a hot bath and hairwash!"

"Since when do you wash your hair?" Lome remarked, and was answered by a fistful of grass.

Lome untied Momma E and they started off again.

"What does that post up there say? I didn't see it before," Lome said. Up ahead was a large wooden sign above a stand.

"Dunno," said Juna. "Who would set up a stand out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Momma E bleated.

"Come on," said Lome and pulled her leash.

The words "TRADE" appeared painted across the sign as they came closer. The R was backwards. Underneath the sign was a counter littered with trinkets. A fat little man popped up from behind it all, waving vigorously at them and calling out.

"Hellu! Hellu young ones! Hellu! Hellu! Come to my stand of trade! Come trade your things! Hellu! Hellu!"

The whole thing looked as it had just been set up in expectation of their arrival. The fat little man continued his hollering. "Hellu! Hellu!"

"It's as if he thinks he hasn't gotten our attention already. We're the only ones out here!" said Juna.

"Well, let's see what he's got. Maybe some food! I'm starving," replied Lome.

CHAPTER 16

The fat little man had short reddish hair with one curl exactly in the middle of his forehead. His rosy cheeks were dotted with freckles and gleamed in the sunlight. He was dressed in what once must have been a very elegant blue suit, but was now tattered and dirty and faded. At his neck a lovely velvet green cape was fastened tightly by a large golden button, which Lome thought would burst off and hit him in the nose if the man moved suddenly.

"Hellu young ones and what brings you to my famous shop of trades on such a fabulous day in such a fine place?"

"Famous? Fabulous? Fine?" said Lome. He felt a jab as Juna elbowed him in the side.

"What he means to say, sir." said Juna, trying to sound polite, "is that we come from a small village and don't often receive word from outside. Forgive us for not knowing about your fame."

"Not to worry! Not to worry young ones. I never stay in one place for more than a day! In that case, let me introduce myself. I am Sir Osmiwise Akin Seenoi the Seventh, Representative and Councilman of the Guild of Trades, but for the sake of brevity you may call me Ozzy!" With

that, the stout little man grabbed the side of his green cape and brought it over his large stomach in a little bow. "The greatest men have the simplest of names of course!" Ozzy laughed. His belly shook and his jowls danced, causing the golden button to shake. Lome put his hand over his nose just in case. Ozzy continued, gesturing in the air as if he were speaking to a large crowd.

"My mother was an exiled princess from the land beyond the mist and my father but a simple fisherman who saved her from certain death when she was cast into the Eastern sea by her father's enemies!" With this, he leaned deeply forward over the counter and grabbed Juna and Lome around the shoulders, hugging them closely so that they were looking directly at the counter.

"I have devoted my life to traveling the five corners of the world and have seen many a peculiar thing. I started my trades with merely a rusty metal bucket, which I traded to a blind woman for a lousy set of spoons, and the rest is history! Poor woman didn't know the bucket had a hole in the bottom, but you look smart, so no need to worry!"

Ozzy glanced from one to the other. He lowered his voice and raised his eyebrows. "Take a look at my grand selection of things and find something that enchants you, something that excites you!" He let go of them and began flailing his arms to an imaginary audience.

"Something that entices the desires of your hearts!" He took another bow and a drop of sweat fell from his nose. He looked up at Lome and Juna and added, "nut for a trade of course! Ha ha!" Ozzy clapped his hands together and looked at the two. "By the way, young miss, where did you get such a *fine fur* hood? I'd *love* to trade you for it!"

"No thanks," replied Juna. "But perhaps you can give us some insight. We've come from the west and the forest there has been through somewhat of a terrible dry spell. Would you happen to know anything about it?"

"Dry spell, you say?" replied Ozzy. "Don't know much about dry forests, other than a little rain might be the cure! Just came from the east myself and arrived in this here spot this morning! Looked like a dandy place to set up a trade stand for the day."

"Really?" said Lome, looking around. "Doesn't seem like a very high traffic area to me—ow!" Lome bent down to rub his shin where Juna had kicked him.

"But of course!" said Ozzy, ignoring Lome's rudeness. "Made a fine trade just this morning, before you two came up over the hill."

"Oh yeah? Who with?" asked Lome.

"A trader never reveals who he's traded to!" Ozzy said almost in offence. "But all is forgiven. Have you any items you'd like me to appraise? Any old coins or pieces of ancestral jewelry perhaps?"

Lome felt compelled to show the man his mother's pendant. Through his travels he must have learned some information relating to it. "Umm," he said. "Would you happen to know anything about this?" He pulled his mother's pendant from his bag. Ozzy's eyes opened so wide they nearly popped out of their sockets.

"Oh my! I...uh...umm, no. Never seen such a thing before." Ozzy pulled a handkerchief from his front pocket and began dabbing his brow. "Looks like a piece of junk unfortunately, if I dare to be honest. You'd probably just want to throw it on my stand with the rest of this junk. No sense in keeping it, it would only weigh down your pretty neck."

"Oh, well if you don't know anything about it, then never mind." He returned the pendant to his bag. An awkward silence hung in the air as Ozzy stared blankly at him.

"Actually... well... yes, I do!" Ozzy spoke up.

Lome perked up with eager attention.

"In fact I was told you might... uh... have it."

"You were? By who?"

"Oh... umm, well my tea leaves lay in such a pattern this morn. They said a young lad would come from the forest and give me a worthless trinket. I've got to listen to my tea leaves, you know!"

"I'm not giving it away," replied Lome.

At last Juna said, "Please, Sir Osmiw-"

"Just Ozzy, dear child!"

"Right. Please Ozzy, would you happen to have any food to trade?"

"Fa... food?" exclaimed the portly man, putting a hand to his bulging neck in surprise.

"Why of course not! The stuff is worthless! One moment you have a feast in front of you and the next it's gone forever!"

Lome couldn't help but glance at Ozzy's large belly and opened his mouth to make a remark, but Juna kicked him in the shin again.

"Oh, well thank you anyway," said Juna. "I think we'd best be on our way then." She grabbed Lome's arm.

"Wait, I want to take a look at what he's got," said Lome.

"Yes, that's right! Now go on, young ones, see what fancies you may have! Ha ha!"

Juna turned to Lome and whispered in his ear, "I don't like the sound of this guy, something is amiss. Why would he be here in the middle of nowhere all of a sudden? Let's just continue to Siango."

Ozzy scrunched his face and looked as though he was about to cry.

"Oh, come now, little girl. Let the boy look around. Perhaps I can interest you in something yourself! A pretty cloth perhaps?" said Ozzy and he pulled a torn doily from under the counter.

"How about a warm eye?" he said plucking a squishy orb from a drawer.

"Or a one-of-a-kind snake feather hairpin?" he said, pulling one out from under a pile. "A vile of ointment for your friend's scars, maybe?" Lome looked up, but Juna dismissed the bottle as probably nothing but a fake "cure-all".

"Something is bound to catch your eye," Ozzy said. Lome saw that Juna suddenly noticed a large book hidden behind a pile of rat tails and old spools and under a stack of plates. Books weren't very easy to come by as Lome knew. He went back to poring over at all the items on the counter. Clicking metal birds, bottles of eyelashes, wooden beetles, a collection of fish teeth encased in glass, dolls with pins in their faces, a pickled foot. The more Lome looked at the piles of things, the more interesting things he found.

"Ahhhh, ha ha! So the young girl does have an eye for something!" With both his stubby arms, he swept all the items around the book off the counter, sending the rat tails, spools and plates crashing to the ground. With a sudden delicate touch he picked up the book, his pinkies outstretched.

"A fine and useful codex," he said. Its covers were a faded forest green with a copper spine. A leather arm strap was hooked to the spine by metal loops at either end and a fastening held the tome's covers together. "I traded it from the chief of a desert nomad troop for twelve lizard tongues and a cricket swatter. Poor man had a pest problem in his tent."

"Err, we should really get going," Juna said and nudged Lome. "We mean to make Siango by nightfall."

"No worries! There's still plenty of time! Lots of time!" Ozzy turned the thick book over so that Juna could see its title, which read *Herbalis* in faded letters. The edges were decorated with intertwining plants. Lome looked up and saw the eagerness on Juna's face. "I have studied it personally," Ozzy continued. "It contains a complete collection of all plant knowledge for all purposes. Perhaps it's a topic you're interested in?" He lifted one eyebrow and pursed his lips and Lome knew that Juna was thinking of the sprouts in her bag. "It can be yours of course," Ozzy added.

"Well, how much are you selling it for?" asked Juna.

"Nonsense, girl! Did you not read the sign above my head? It says, 'trade'! I trade for things, not for money! Money, ha! You cannot do much with money!"

"Well, I'm sure I haven't got anything you could want."

"There is always something of value to trade." Ozzy looked Juna up and down. "You sure you want to keep your hood?"

"I'm not trading it," replied Juna, to Lome's relief.

Ozzy shot a glance at Lome's bag. "Perhaps for your braids which hang below your canine cloak?"

"What?" cried Juna grabbing both her braids in fists.

Ozzy continued to name things Juna might trade for the tome, but she kept saying no.

"Well then, perhaps your fine goat! A goat for a tome!"

"No," interrupted Lome. "She's not for trade."

Momma E bleated in agreement.

"Oh, well that's too bad! I see you'd like to play along at this game now, young lad. Err... uh... Hmm... How.. How about a trade of the tome for your shoes!"

"My shoes?" said Lome.

"No? Well there must be something you're willing to trade for! I'd trade anything for the tome, so little worth it has. Anything at all would do, even your name, boy. I don't know it yet and I'd like to. You certainly know mine!"

Lome was delighted; all he had to do was tell this fat man his name? This would more than make it up to Juna for arguing with her before. He didn't have to give up his pendant or even his shoes for that matter, just tell his name.

"You can't trade a name!" replied Juna.

"Ahhhh, but you can! You can trade it as easy as trading your shoes, girl!"

"Come on," said Juna to Lome. "Don't do it, it may be a trick."

"Oh, so the little lady likes tricks does she?" said Ozzy happily. "Perhaps you would like to make a trade for a kit of tricks?" Ozzy pulled out a little black box from behind the counter. Juna rolled her eyes and grabbed Lome's arm, pulling him away. "Perhaps you'd like to trade your smile for the tome, young lady? A lot of frowns, but not one smile I've seen so far!"

Juna steamed at the ears.

"Come now, little lad," Ozzy directed at Lome. "Tell me your name!"

"I don't like the sound of this," said Juna. "Besides, it's getting late and we're both starving!"

Lome knew Juna would thank him later for the tome. "Hey cut it out, Momma E!" he said as the goat grabbed his shirt in her teeth.

"Is it a trade or not?" asked Ozzy.

"Lome. My name is Lome," he said, pushing Momma E away and taking the tome from the table. He handed it to Juna and then mimicked her earlier politeness. "Thank you kindly, Sir Ozzy. Now excuse us, we would like to get to Siango by nightfall."

"Haha! Lome. LomeLomeLomeLomeLome! What a fine name, the Throne Stone and the old book be they yours, but what a foolish boy, willing to trade the only name he's got."

Juna grabbed Lome's arm and they walked briskly off, pulling Momma E by her leash. Ozzy picked up the torn doily and waved it at them as they parted. "Send my regards to the lovely ladies of Siango! Ha ha!" he called to them. "But we're sure to meet again! Maybe you'll want to trade your name back for the Throne Stone! Ta-ta!"

Lome suddenly felt uneasy about his trade. What had that fat little man meant about the only name he had and being foolish to trade it? And what was a *Throne Stone*? "Did that Ozzy character seem anxious to get my mother's pendant from me?" asked Lome.

"That man was anxious to do anything," responded Juna. "Besides, not *everything* is after your pendant."

CHAPTER 17

As they neared Siango, the black clouds grew larger. Lome tried to rush Momma E, but the old goat wouldn't cooperate, so he unhitched her and pulled the cart himself. She suddenly became happy to trail alongside Lome, now that she wasn't doing any of the work and he had to swat her away as she'd try to nibble his shirt.

"Juna, you can sit in the back if you like."

"Okay!"

"Ugh, stop it, Momma E!" said Lome, pushing her nose away. She bleated happily and Lome couldn't help but smile at her. He looked over his shoulder and saw Juna anxiously poring through the pages of her tome. "Having fun?"

"This book is amazing!" Juna said. "I've never read such a complete collection of herbs before. And here, look! In the front cover it's got a little felt pouch to keep samples in. I'd love to find out where this tome came from!"

"Maybe we can ask around in Siango. Someone's bound to know."

Juna jumped off the cart and began examining the plants that grew in patches on their path. Common weeds Lome wouldn't take a second look at, but Juna would trim and collect.

"The tome is really detailed," she said, easily finding a page dedicated to each plant she picked. "It's got so many herbs in it, each diagram has a description beside it with suggested uses. I wish I had had this book a long time ago, it would've been so helpful! But it's peculiar, at the bottom of each page reads, *ineffective*. I wonder what they're are ineffective against?"

By early evening they reached the wooden gates of Siango and for the better, because it had begun to rain. The streets were empty save for a few people running from one place to the

next, trying to keep out of the downpour. Lome got his cloak from the cart and Juna slung the tome's arm strap around her neck and tucked the tome under her wolf skin to keep it dry. As they entered the city, they couldn't help but gawk at the buildings, which towered above them.

"I can't even see the tops of the buildings!" exclaimed Juna.

Lome stood there amazed himself, but also a little scared. The heavy wind and the rain swayed the buildings and they creaked as they scurried between them. Hartha had once told Lome how nobody wanted to take the trouble of tearing down the meagre wooden wall that surrounded the city to expand, so they just built ever upwards as their population had grown.

"I see an inn up ahead," said Juna. "With this rain, we'll have to wait till tomorrow to go to market." Just then a bolt of lightning hit the inn's roof, illuminating the entire building. Its dozens of floors shifted back and forth in the wind like layers of toppling cake.

"I don't know, Juna. Maybe we should find another place."

"It's just for the night and I'm getting soaked! Don't worry, tomorrow we can see what we can trade in the market and find more information about the forest."

"And my mother," added Lome.

"Of course, your mother, now hurry up!"

Momma E planted her feet in the mud and licked her lips as the raindrops poured into her open mouth.

"Come on!" said Lome as he pulled at her rope. After some more pushing and prodding and a swift kick in the rear, Momma E finally cooperated. By the time they reached the inn, they were completely soaked.

Another bolt of lightning lit up the street and Lome was able to see the entrance more clearly. The sign hanging above the doorway read: Blackmere's Hole. A large toothy smile was carved into the sign. To the side of the inn was a horse shelter. The two quickly hurried inside it.

"Don't think this junky shed has ever housed a horse, but these inn keepers sure are prepared if it ever does!" said Lome as Juna helped him tie Momma E to a post. Piles of straw lay heaped all around. A scatter of pigeons had taken shelter amongst the straw and Juna shooed them away to make room for Momma E. They took their bags and headed for the inn. "Juna, do you think I should bring my bow in?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "It might look a little threatening if two strangers bring weapons with them."

"Fair," he replied.

Momma E bleated as they left, and kicked her feet into the straw. Lome went over and patted her on the nose.

"I'm sorry. I don't have any mudroots for you, old girl," he said, holding her face in both his hands and looking into her large grey eyes. "But we'll bring you something tasty in the morning."

It was dark and damp inside the inn. It looked more like a tavern than anything. Wooden beams held the ceiling up around a small bar and the smell of old fish hung in the air.

"Well, well, well, what have we got here?" said a booming voice behind the bar. It came from a very large man with a great black beard covering his whole face. He opened his humongous mouth and chuckled, spraying spit and revealing his yellowed teeth, the few of them that were left— no doubt it was Blackmere himself.

"Two soakin' dingy rats— a boy and a girl," Blackmere said with a wink. The few men seated at the bar laughed and slapped their glass mugs together.

"Just here to spend the night, please" said Juna courteously.

"And something to eat!" added Lome.

Blackmere handed a mug of frothing liquid to one of the men at the bar, who took a long drink and nearly fell off his stool.

"Of course y'are. I've got something special cooked up for yer dinners. Have ye got any money, or are ye beggar kids?" said the burley, hairy Blackmere. He grinned and showed off his revolting smile again. The men at the bar laughed again and drank some more. "I aints putting up with no stinkin' beggar kids!"

"We are not 'beggar kids'," said Juna hotly. "We've money to pay you to put us up." She nudged Lome.

"That's right" Lome added, embarrassed as the men at the bar laughed.

"Enough for the night, thank you," said Juna.

"And food!" added Lome.

"Very well," grinned Blackmere. "I'll fix yers something while I get yer room prepared." Blackmere thrust his large hand up and planted it on the ceiling, making the whole room shake. "GEARMINAH!" He yelled upwards as he thumped his hand on the ceiling.

"Whatd'ya want?" yelled back an equally burly voice, with a certain feminine tone.

"Fixup two rooms fer two youngins. They be stayin the night!"

"Uh, Blackmere..." said Lome. He thought of asking about his mother, or even the forest. An innkeeper would have seen many travelers and heard many tales over the years.

"What'sit?" said Blackmere, raising his big bushy unibrow in an intimidating manner.

"Oh... uh... nothing," said Lome nervously.

There was a pause of silence before the whole inn creaked. The walls shivered and a thundering noise came from above as a very generous sized woman in a dirty apron came bounding down the crooked stairs beside the bar.

"Awww! Dearies!" she exclaimed as she reached the bottom and bounded forward, embracing both Lome and Juna and in a smothering hug. She was equally as large and burly as Blackmere. "What precious little children! Welcome to Siango's finest ("and only" Blackmere muttered) inn! What on earth are you doing out on a night like this?" Gearminah's voice suddenly had a flowery tone to it and she leaned over and pinched Lome's cheek.

"Well, we uh-" started Lome. He thought about asking her about the forest and his mother, but he was interrupted by Gearminah's high pitched squeal.

"Ai! But you're wet as a river! It's a good thing that Nasty Nark's just been caught, so the rain is the worst you could've been through. Give your things here, can't have you catching all types of ails, now can we?" Before Lome or Juna realized what was happening, Gearminah had pulled off their capes. "Blackmere!" she boomed. "Give these wee sweet biscuits some warm cookins!" and she bounded back up the stairs quick as she had come down.

"Woman thinks she runs th'place!" said Blackmere and he winked at the men at the bar, who laughed and took big swigs of their beer.

"Blackmeeeeeeere!" Gearminah yelled from upstairs so loudly that the floor shook, the dirty mugs on the shelves quivered, the cobwebbed candle chandelier suspended from the ceiling swayed, and one of the drunken men fell off his stool.

"Yes, dear," whispered Blackmere and went into the kitchen.

Lome joined Juna at a small table in the far corner of the room. Soon afterwards Blackmere returned with two bowls of hot soup and set them on the table, splashing the liquid all over.

"Snail and centipede, with a dash of thyme," he said with a wink at Lome as he pushed one of the bowls towards him with a toothy smile, "Eat till yer burst, I've got plenty more!" He went back to the bar. Lome looked cautiously at a spoonful of the steaming creamy liquid and sniffed.

"It doesn't smell that bad," he said. His stomach growled. He hadn't eaten anything since their bread dried up in the forest.

"Relax, it's creamed chicken," replied Juna.

"Stop telling me to relax, Juna—"

"Seriously! It says so on the menu!" Juna pointed to a sign behind the bar. While Lome read the menu, someone ran from the kitchen and bolted up the stairs. Before Lome could catch a proper glimpse of the man, Blackmere suddenly stood in the way.

"I picked the snails fresh this mornin'," Blackmere said. The men at the bar burst out laughing again. Lome turned around embarrassed and nervously slurped a spoonful of soup, he could tell that Blackmere's eyes were fixed upon him.

"Juna," Lome whispered. "Does this soup taste funny to you?"

"No," Juna whispered back. "Just be polite and don't cause any trouble. I don't like the look of Blackmere and the men at the bar."

"Yeah," replied Lome. "I want to be out of here quick tomorrow morning. We can spend some time in the market finding out info and stock up and then we'll go back on the northward path."

"What do you think we'll find northward? The forest was all dried up. There wasn't anything as far as we could see."

"People come from all around to trade here. Someone's got to know about my pendant and the forest. Maybe there's a small village to the north that they know about. She could have come from there?"

"What do you think you'll do if there is?"

"I'm not sure. I'd like to find out who she was at least. Maybe I have more family living there still?"

"If they're still there, it's strange that she ran away then. I wonder what she ran so far from so far?"

Lome didn't respond and kept eating. He was too hungry to care about the bad taste it left in his mouth. Gearminah appeared again after they had finished their bowls, and brought them up to their rooms on the twelfth floor. The walls swayed and creaked and pieces of brick lay on the stairs where they had fallen from the walls. Lome expected the stairs to break under Gearminah's huge weight, but they only bent and creaked as she ascended.

Once on the twelfth floor, Gearminah led Juna to her room and then Lome to his. Lome didn't want to leave Juna's side for the night. Something made him feel uneasy about the place

and after the wolf incident, he felt the need to protect her. Still, Gearminah shooed him away. "It's not right and proper for young boys and girls to stay in the say room," she said and led him to his own room, laying fresh clothes on his bed. She then exited and waited for Lome to change. A few moments later, Lome opened the door and handed her the dripping wet pile.

"There's a bath across the hall and I'll have yer things dry as a baked bun in the mornin'."

"Okay," said Lome. "We've left a goat with our cart and bags in your shed outside."

"Not to worry. I'll have Blackmere see to it that he's—"

"He's a she," interrupted Lome.

"That she's fed as well as you've been. Now get yer some rest!"

"Gearminah?" Lome asked timidly. He wasn't exactly fond of asking strange people strange questions, but he was so anxious to find out some answers, he blurted two questions out at once. "Do you know anything about the forest dying to the west, or a woman running away with a baby years ago?" He realized how silly that all just sounded.

"Dead forest? Stolen baby?" Gearminah put her hand to her large bosom. "Next thing I know, you'll be wantin' to tie up wolves in our shed. Snails and snakes, son. What on earth are you talking 'bout?"

"Uhh, nothing. Just some things I heard... Wait, you had a wolf in your shed?"

"Yes, a wolf from Central, one of those terrible beasts they got, took a few heavy coins to convince me to keep it up for a night. It looked just like the one on your girlfriend's head—"

"She's not my girlfriend," said Lome. "Who could've brought a wolf?"

Gearminah frowned. "Here I am filling your head with more nonsense! You be putting those thoughts in the trash, now. Nothin'll sleep you worse than some worrisome thoughts!"

Gearminah scolded. "And if yer be needin' anything, anything at all, just holler, yer hear? And don't let my good for nothing husband get the worst of yer." She pinched Lome's cheek and off she went, booming down the hall.

The room was small, only large enough for a bed and a washbasin, which had a mirror hanging above it. Lome wondered how many rooms the inn had. He recalled Hartha telling him how the population of Siango tripled in size on market days. The inn must be filled with travelling merchants. Lome went over to scrub his face and examined himself. Three long scars slid across his right cheek, reaching from his mouth and just missing his eye. Though they had faded somewhat, they were still noticeable. He ran his fingers along the bumps and thought of where the wolf had come from. Lome shook his head. He began to feel lightheaded and his vision became a bit blurry. A knock on the wall interrupted his thoughts.

"Hey!" It was Juna, talking through the wall. "I'm going for a hot bath."

"Juna, do you feel a bit funny? I think there might've been something rotten in that soup?"

"I feel fine, just get some sleep and you'll feel better in the morning."

"Ok," Lome called back. He went over to the bed and unpacked his leather satchel. He took out his coin purse, his mother's pendant, and the obsidian knife—all the belongings in the world he had now, save for his bow and Momma E which were in the horse shelter. He laid everything out on the bed's faded sheets. Lome perked his ears to a sound at his door. He went over and stood still behind the threshold, listening. With a quick motion he opened the door and

looked out. *Strange*, he thought. No one was there. He could hear Juna running a bath,. Steam wisped out of the crack at the top of the bath chamber door. Lome closed the door again and locked it, placing the key on the nightstand beside the bed and returned to examining his possessions.

He yawned, his head felt really funny now and he wondered if there had been something strange in his soup. Lome put the knife back in his bag, but held out his mother's pendant before him again. His head became heavy and his vision started to blur. He had never felt so tired in his life. "Juna!" he tried to call, but his voice was weak. *Something must have been in my soup...* *That was Artulo I saw run from the kitchen!* For a brief moment, he panicked. He looked across the room to the mirror and regained clarity.

CHAPTER 18

Lome awoke softly, but remained half in dream, still dizzy. "Who's there?" he asked. Through his blurred vision a dark figure silhouetted the light behind his open door. "Juna?" he muttered, but no reply came. He tried to get up, but felt his chest being pushed down and instantly sleep found him again.

"Be the morning, it is. Wake yerself up now," Gearminah's voice boomed.

Lome sat up immediately. He felt like he'd been hit with a bag of bricks. His whole head ached.

"I've brought yer clothes, get yerself dressed and Blackmere'll have some breakfast prepared for you to stomach. Nothing like bacon grease and po'tates in the mornin'!"

Gearminah stomped off down the stairs and the whole inn shook again. Quickly Lome grabbed his things and closed the door.

He went to the mirror, and saw his anxious face reflected in it. He brought both hands to its sides and carefully lifted it. A sigh of relief washed over him. His mother's pendant still hung on the nail in the wall by its chain, right where he had hid it the night before.

He replaced the mirror and washed his face again in the basin. *Juna, with the braids and me with the face of scars*, he thought as he looked into his reflection. He changed into his brown slacks and draw-string blue shirt before grabbing his satchel and headed downstairs.

Juna was sitting at the same table as last night. The dining area was packed with merchants, who had also stayed the night. The smell of bacon grease wafted in the air and made Lome's stomach growl. "Let's eat quickly so we can leave," she said as Lome sat down across from her. "I didn't sleep much. I've been up since dawn," she continued. "I read through half of

my book and still haven't come across anything with even the slightest resemblance to those yellow sprouts. Though it's curious, each page still says *ineffective*."

Blackmere came over to their table, making the floorboards bend under his massive weight.

"We'd like to see the breakfast menu please," asked Juna politely.

"Not so quick," replied Blackmere, his bushy unibrow in a frown. "Me wants to see youse pay up for the room first. I 'aint runnin' no charity inn! It'll be 25 pieces for yer room and grub so far."

Juna nodded to Lome. Some of the men from last night were still sitting and drinking at the bar as if they had never left. They eyed Lome as he reached into his satchel for his coin purse. His face turned white. His purse wasn't there and neither was his dagger. They had been replaced with pieces of crumbled brick.

"Yers ARE them begger kids!" yelled Blackmere shaking the inn with his voice. The entire room of merchants stopped and stared. "I knews it!"

"I must have left my coins in my room. I'll be right back." said Lome. Blackmere's beady eyes followed him as he left the table and bounded up the steps, all twelve flights. He reached his room sweaty and heaving. He threw the sheets off the bed and checked under it, behind the door, everywhere. Nothing. The purse and dagger were nowhere to be found.

"BOY!" yelled Blackmere up the stairs.

Lome double checked every nook and cranny in the room. He ran up and down the hall searching everywhere he could. Nothing.

"Well, have yers the monies?" asked Blackmere when Lome emerged at the bottom of the stairs. Lome shook his head.

"Stinkin' lie-in' begger kids!" screamed Blackmere, slamming a mug on the table which shattered into pieces, leaving only its handle in the large man's fist.

Lome thought Blackmere was overdramatizing the situation. "We can wash dishes, or—"

"There's nothing I hates more." The men at the bar turned to share their looks of disapproval. Lome slunk into the corner where Juna still sat.

"What'sa rackkit in 'ere?" Gearminah bellowed, emerging from the back door near the kitchen with a bundle in her apron.

"These two youngin's have been stealing from us!" raged Blackmere, squeezing his giant hands in front of him into white knuckled fists.

Gearminah dropped her groceries.

"What?" she said with a delayed reaction. Lome felt as though the whole thing was a setup. He was sure they had put something in his soup before. And now everything was taken except his pendant.

Lome looked around at all the eyes on him and started to explain, "Honest, we had money. I forgot my coins this morning when I came down and someone's been in the room since!"

Gearminah leaped over to Lome and Juna in two giant strides and picked them up by their ears. "Run a tight business we be doing here and we haven't gots room fer li'le thieving childrens!" she said in a much less flowery tone than she had used before. "Now," bellowed Gearminah. "Have yagots monies or nots?"

"Nots," whispered Lome staring at his feet.

"I'd say call the Magistrate and lock'em up these kids with that Nasty Nark!" said Blackmere.

Juna wriggled free and grabbed Lome's arm, jerking him from Gearminah's grip. "Let's get out of here!" she yelled and pulled Lome towards the front door. Juna slammed it hard behind them so viciously that a windowpane came off its hinge and a brick from one of the inn's ten chimneys tumbled down and nearly hit Lome on the head.

They ran past the horse shed and could hear Momma E bleating and kicking her feet.

"What about Momma E?" cried Lome, Juna still pulling at his arm. The front door of the inn burst open and shattered onto the ground. Gearminah bounded forward, the ladle in her hand like a sword.

"No time! Just run!" screamed Juna, ducking as the ladle hurled towards her, and the two of them sprinted off as fast as they could. Down the street Lome looked over his shoulder to see the huge Gearminah with her hands on her knees catching her breath and yelling obscenities he had never even heard before.

"We's be cookin' your goat for next week's special, ya thieving childrens!" she yelled.

Lome shuddered at the thought of Momma E in a soup, but kept running.

Finally they rounded a corner and stopped in an alleyway to rest. Juna stared at Lome, her face flushing red with anger.

"Juna," he tried to explain. "Here, look, someone was in my room, I swear!" She dumped his satchel upside down and the pieces of brick fell out. "There must've been something in my soup, I felt so weird last night."

“How could that happen? All my things were there in the morning, how did they know you had our money? Is everything gone? What about your mother’s jewellery?”

“I still have it,” said Lome, lifting it from under his shirt. “It’s the one thing they didn’t take, but I hid it. I swear it was Arturo.”

“What would he be doing here? And why would he care if you were here, he hates you?”

“He wants my pendant,” said Lome, sitting beside Juna on the rock and putting his head in his hands. “Everything is going terribly. I lost all of our money, Momma E is probably going to be on next week’s soup menu and look, look at my face, Juna. Look at these scars!”

Juna put her arm around him and tried to smile. “Never mind about anything, we’re close to the market. Someone is bound to know something. Come on, let’s go see what we can dig up.”

"Juna," Lome started. "About what I said before, about not asking you to come. Well, I didn't really mean that at all. I was just angry and confused, I don't know why I was acting like that. I just wish I knew what happened to my mother."

Juna turned to Lome and stood up. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “We were both acting strangely.”

Lome took a moment to realize that they didn't have any money anymore. They couldn't stock up and head back to the dead forest as planned. "We have to go back for Momma E," he said.

"Not right now," replied Juna. "They'll expect us to return for her."

"Well, we can't go back to the forest with nothing."

"You still have your pendant and I still have my book. We can ask about them both in the market."

"Yeah," replied Lome. "Maybe we can learn something at the least."

CHAPTER 19

The market was packed. It was in the centre of the town, filled with stalls practically on top of one another. Each sported a colourful cloth cover as outrageous as the last, which served as an advertisement and the only way to tell the stalls apart. Lome and Juna had to elbow their way through. Juna put up her wolf hood to try and shy away from the constant stares they received. Neither of them knew where to start.

The smells were completely overwhelming—incense and spices, animals, baked goods, fresh fish. Lome's stomach growled all the more. He was starving and exhausted from running and all he could think about was the meat pies in the stall to his left, but of course he didn't have any money. It made him feel even more uneasy about being in such a strange place, and it didn't help that everyone was shouting.

"Cabbages! Cabbages!"

"Fine imported rugs!"

"Hats! A lovely hat for the lovely wolf lady!"

"PIES! PIES!" a lanky man squawked.

One vendor displayed a large pile of old wheels and Lome thought about the one that had split on his cart. His resentment for Artulo grew. He was sure it was him that had stolen his money.

"I don't like it here," said Juna.

"Let's get in and out as fast as we can." Lome agreed. "Keep on the lookout for anyone with jewelry."

"Or herbs," Juna added.

A man carrying a cage full of squirrels knocked Juna to the ground as he strode past. Lome helped her up and they interlocked arms to keep from separating. A young boy sat on a blue carpet in front of a stall with a selection of items laid out on a tattered blanket. He looked up at Lome and held out some items.

"Buy something, will ya? A tin mug, slightly used? A stick that looks like a snake? A white, round stone?"

Lome became intrigued when he heard the word, *stone*. Juna on the other hand had just spotted an herb stall, where a mousey looking lady had heaps of dried plants stacked high. "Lome, look," she said pointing towards the stall, "Maybe she will know about those strange yellow sprouts I've found."

"Just wait a second," Lome said and went over to the boy, dragging Juna by the arm.

"Did you say you have a white, round stone?" Lome asked. The boy, suddenly aware he had a potential customer quickly closed his hands around the stone and held it behind his back.

"Whatcha give me for the stone?" he said as he eyed the pair of them.

"What do you want for it?"

"Two... err three, THREE pieces!" said the boy and he held out one hand in front of him with his thumb tucked into his palm. Noticing that he had too many fingers up, he waggled them with a struggle until only three were left. "Three pieces for the stone!" he repeated.

"That's a lot of money for a stone," said Juna. "May we see it first?"

The boy looked sceptical, but Juna crouched down so she was eye level with him. She took the wolf hood off her head and gave him a big smile. "Pleeeeeease," she said.

The boy didn't say anything, but reached out his empty hand to them and held it palm upwards, motioning for money.

"I'm sorry, but we don't have any money with us," said Juna. "Do you mind if we see it anyways?"

The boy bit his lower lip and shook his head.

"Hey, I'll trade you my name for the stone." said Lome, remembering how easily he'd traded his name to Ozzy. "I've got a really great name, I bet you'd love to hear it!"

The boy looked highly sceptical, his face scrunched up as if he was thinking very hard. Juna turned to Lome and frowned at him.

"Err... okay," the boy finally said and held out the stone.

Lome sighed, the stone in the boy's hand was very regular looking with no symbols on it, nothing at all like the white stone in his mother's pendant. "Sorry," he said. "It's not the type of stone I'm looking for."

"But," said the boy. "Look! It's got a really neat edge on it over here and-"

"Sorry, not interested," said Lome and he started to walk away.

"Hey!" said the boy. "You said I could have your name if you could see it."

"No," replied Lome. "I said you could have my name if I wanted the stone and now that I see it, I don't want it." Juna frowned at him.

"That's not fair!" said the boy. "Tell me your name!"

Lome felt bad. "Okay," he said. "I'll tell you my name..." He thought hard, but couldn't recall it. Juna was still frowning at him. "I... I... I don't know what it is," he said.

"You're just picking on me now," said the boy.

"That's a really mean trick," she whispered to Lome. "I'll tell you his name," she said to the boy. She opened her lips to speak, but nothing came out. She looked back at Lome with a look of puzzlement. She couldn't remember his name either. "What on earth? I can't think of your name."

"I know," replied Lome thinking really hard. "Neither can I."

"I mean I *really* can't think of your name," said Juna. "It's as if... Ozzy! That rascal! You traded your name, remember?"

"Of course I remember, but how can it have happened? You think he owns my name now?"

"Something's wrong. He can't own your name, that just doesn't make sense. I've known you nearly my whole life and now all of a sudden I don't know who you are? He must've done something to us. There are certain herbs that when powdered and inhaled can induce short term memory loss."

"I don't remember anything like that," said Lome.

"Stop playing around," said the boy. "It's not nice!"

Juna glanced off to the side and then turned to the boy again, smiling.

"Don't worry," Juna said. "I'll tell you my name instead, though I don't want to trade it, I just want to be your friend. My name is Juna. Now do you know where we can find someone who knows about stones?"

Lome looked around and cautiously revealed the pendant which hung around his neck by lifting it above his draw string collar. "We're wondering if someone might know about this one," he said.

The boy squinted at the stone, and then scrunched his face, thinking. He was reluctant to respond, but Juna's smile was so friendly he couldn't resist.

"Yeah. There's a man who probably has lots of those kinds that way," he said and pointed up the street. "He has a very skinny stall with a big eye on it."

"Thank you very much," said Juna, standing up. "I hope you find someone who likes your stone." She turned to give Lome a frown again. "If we get some money, we'll come back here and buy it from you. For three whole pieces."

Lome and Juna waved goodbye to the boy and started off in the direction he had pointed in.

"You know, you could be a little nicer," said Juna to Lome under her breath. "He's just a boy. That was a mean thing to do to try and trick him like that."

Lome shrugged, "Relax, Juna."

"I'm serious! And the thing about your name, we have to find Ozzy again. I don't even know what to call you now. Everything has been really strange since we left Thurlow. Let's ask around and then get out of here."

"Okay, fine," said Lome and brushed off the subject. He wasn't sure what to think. The day really hadn't started off very well. "We'll talk about it later, but first let's go find the stall with the eye on it."

"Wait a moment," said Juna, tugging his arm. "I'd like to check out that herb stand over there, since we're here already."

"It can wait, Juna," replied Lome. "I might find out something important!"

"Okay, but let's come back here."

They continued on through the busy market, nearly getting knocked over with every step, elbows in their sides as all sorts of people carrying all sorts of things bumped into them.

"Hey Juna, look," said Lome, suddenly seeing a familiar face on the other side of the street through a gap in the crowd.

"Look there! I swear I saw Hartha!" Just as he stuck out his arm to point, he jabbed a short lady, carrying a rolled up rug on her head, right in the eye. She smacked him.

"Sorry, miss! Really sorry, didn't mean it," he called, rubbing his reddening cheek as she sped off in a huff. He looked again, but Hartha was gone.

"I didn't know he was coming here again! That makes three times this month. Usually he only comes here twice a year," said Lome. "I bet Artulo is around here somewhere."

"I thought we were in a hurry," said Juna tartly and Lome remembered how he had pulled her away from the herb stand.

"Uhhh, yeah. Okay, let's go." He looked again in the direction he thought he had seen Hartha, but a bulging woman obstructed his view, selling roasted pigeons on a stick. She had one in each hand and in between mouthfuls she managed to sputter, "smidgeon of pigeon?" Lome's stomach growled, but Juna was pulling at his arm motioning him on.

"What fine pelts!" came a voice. Lome looked around his shoulder and a man was rolling up two small, furry bear rugs. He unravelled a long twine and tied the two together before

handing them to a woman in exchange for some coin. Lome was reminded of the hunting accident and looked away.

It was hard to miss the stall the boy had mentioned. A giant blue eye was sewn into its yellow cover. Heaps of rings, amulets, broaches, bracelets, necklaces and every other kind of jewellery hung or sat on every available peg, shelf and hook. Each novelty had a stone in it. Tourmaline or malachite, jade or chrysocolla, lapis or amethyst, riverstone or sapphire. The stall must have been worth a fortune. The giant eye sewn into the stall's cover was also decorated with many different stones and a large pearl sat right over the pupil.

The man behind the stall also looked very peculiar himself, with a long thin face and a long pointy moustache. A big scarf was wrapped around his neck and he wore a very ornate jacket. Lome was sure that if anyone could tell him about his mother's pendant, it would be this man.

"Greetings," the jewelry merchant as Lome and Juna elbowed their way to the front of his stand.

"What sparkling thing might catch your eye?" The merchant's voice was very whispery and Lome was surprised he could even hear the man over the boisterous blare of the market.

Eagerly, Lome took his pendant from around his neck and held it up. "Do you know where this might have come from?" he asked.

The jewellery merchant slowly stretched out his long neck to get a better view. He took a monocle from one of the bejewelled pockets of his shirt and gently placed it to his eye.

"HMMMMMMMM," he said, drawing out the sound until he had reached the end of his breath. "HMMMMMMMM." Abruptly he raised his bushy eyebrows and the monocle fell, dangling

by its string from his pocket. He quickly pulled his long neck back like a startled turtle. Lome held his breathe in excitement. "I have before seen this stone," he said, frowning. "It should not be in your possession."

"Tell me about it!" urged Lome. "Where is it from?"

The long necked man hesitated, but opened his lips to speak again. "You really don't know about it?" he hissed.

"No, please!" Lome urged.

"Its markings are rare and forbidden by Lord Swallowtail. It comes from the abandoned city of stone from the north."

"City of stone? You mean there's a city beyond the cracked, grey earth?"

Cautiously the man looked around and spoke low. "Yes. How do you know? It came to ruin a decade and a half ago. The symbols on your stone are the symbols of that city. Everyone from there died in—"

"Hey!" The jewellery merchant was cut off. Someone came pushing up through the crowd shouting at them. "Hey! Thieves! That's my bag! Thieves!"

Startled, Lome dropped the pendant into his bag. Everyone around stopped to see the commotion. Suddenly Lome found himself face to face with Artulo.

"What are you doing here?" asked Juna. Lome's face went crimson red with anger. He looked into the crowd where he had seen Artulo run from and swore that he saw a plump face seated on top of a bulging gold button duck away—Ozzy.

"Artulo, did you steal from me last night? It was you in my room!" cried Lome.

Artulo disregarded Lome and looked first to Juna. "Ahhh, the fine lady, Juna," he said. Juna blushed with a scowl and looked away. "It's always great to be in your company. What are you doing with this here, this... this..."

Lome was eager to hear what Artulo would call him, but Artulo looked up and down Lome with a face of confusion.

"What's his name?" asked Juna.

A smile crept over Artulo's face. "He doesn't have one it seems. I guess I'll call him scabface?"

"What?" Juna and Lome exchanged looks of surprise.

"Are you playing a game too? Was that Ozzy I just saw you with?" demanded Lome.

"I told you I don't know."

Lome was fed up. "Give me back my coins, Artulo! You stole them from me!"

A crowd had formed around them now and Artulo turned to Juna. "Why are you hanging around this *scabface*, Juna? You don't even know who he is! Come with me, you'll be much better off."

"He does have a name, we just can't remember it," she said.

"Seems silly to me," replied Artulo.

"Why are you here, leave us alone," said Juna. "This jewelry merchant was telling us some important information."

"What's going on here?" came a new voice. "Someone yelled thief!" It was one of the town's watch. He stuck out from the crowd by his red mantel and the blade he held tightly at his side.

"This here *scabface* stole my bag!" Artulo accused rather smugly and he snatched the satchel out of Lome's hand. Lome started forward, but the watch stood between them. The crowd looked on as Artulo reached into the bag.

"What's this?" said Artulo. He took out the pendant, holding it up by its chain. His eyes grew wide. There were gasps from the crowd and everyone drew silent. Artulo looked around at the shocked faces.

"He's got the *Throne Stone*! He's one of them!" cried a man from the crowd. Lome took the opportunity to snatch the pendant from Artulo's hand.

"Hey!" Artulo yelled. "That's mine!" He lunged forward to take back the pendant, but Lome moved out of the way. An excited murmur rose from the crowd.

"You have your bag back," said the watch pushing Artulo back. He grabbed Lome by the arm and addressed him. "You will come with me and the *Throne Stone* will be confiscated." He returned his attention to Artulo. "Is everything else all right now?" he asked.

"No! He needs to give me the pendant back. Force him to give it to me!"

"It will be confiscated before the Magistrate and given to Swallowtail. All Throne Stones are illegal," replied the watch.

"Please sir," Artulo said to the watch. "My purse went missing just this morning from Blackmere's Hole, this... this is clearly the thief that stole it! I need payment back and that

Throne Stone is the only thing he's got. It belongs to me. I should be able to collect a reward from Swallowtail for turning it in."

"What?" Lome said shocked. A man from the crowd came forward and Lome recognized him from the bar at Blackmere's.

"He is a thief!" the man said with a toothy lisp. "I was there! The boy tried to get away without payin fer'is room. He gobbled up all Blackmere's grub, then tried ta dash!"

The crowd became even more restless at this.

"Right! It's only fair that he pay me back!" Artulo said.

"He's not a theif!" said Juna.

"This should all be sorted out by the Magistrate, especially since a Throne Stone is involved. This is a serious matter. Now, what of this lady? Do you know her?"

"She's with me," Artulo replied. "I was just taking her to her father's. I have no idea who this dirty scabface is though," he said, with a confused look, adding, "whatever his name may be." Artulo reached forward and took Juna by the arm.

Lome started forward, but the watch held him back forcefully.

"Come now, Juna. We mustn't be late," Artulo said daintily. "Father will be angry."

"Hey!" cried Juna as she was yanked away. "Stop it! What are you doing?" She tugged back at her arm, but Artulo was much stronger. Lome watched as the crowd parted to let Artulo and Juna go. The watch stuck his blade to Lome's side and forced him onward.

"We don't tolerate your kind here," the watch said.

"Juna!" Lome yelled.

CHAPTER 20

Everything was happening so fast. Juna could hear Lome yelling her name, but she couldn't see him any longer. She tried calling for help, but the crowd was full of confusion as they were yelling threats and insults. Still, she resisted Artulo, but it was useless, he was too strong. All she knew was that Lome was off to the Magistrate's, wherever that was. She would try to come up with a plan to learn what Artulo knew and then to find Lome. She gave up resisting and let Artulo drag her through the crowd, elbowing and pushing people out of the way as he went.

"Fancy meeting you here, Juna," said Artulo after dragging her into an alleyway. "I knew your friend would show up sooner or later, but had no idea you would be tagging along."

"I can't believe you called *thief* on him. Go back there and tell them that... that..." Juna couldn't think of Lome's name. "That he's innocent."

"Why would I want to humiliate myself by apologizing?" Artulo let go of Juna and swung Lome's satchel around his shoulder.

Juna's face went red with anger and she was about to speak, but Artulo placed a finger to her lips, "Shhh," he said. "My my, we have a temper, don't we. And what of this fancy little hood you're wearing?" He patted Juna's wolf hood on top of her head.

"He never stole anything from you. In fact his purse was stolen from him!" Juna pushed back and looked him square in the eyes, examining his face.

Artulo grinned and raised a finger to his ear. "I hear they cut off an ear as punishment for thievery in the market. But I'm sure they're treating him with even greater care given they think he's *one of them*," he said and swiped his finger downwards mimicking a slice. "Oops."

Juna's face flushed red with anger. "Artulo! You grew up with us! We've spent our whole lives together in Thurlow. I know you don't like him, but why are you doing this to us?"

"Red is a nice colour on you, Juna."

"How do you know about all these things, Artulo?"

"I know more than you think," he replied. "I'm not ignorant of the world like you and scabface are."

"Call him by his name!" Juna said.

"I would if I knew it, but it's slipped my mind."

"You're lying," said Juna.

"I can easily call thief again if you'd like to join your friend," Artulo threatened.

Juna realized she might learn more from him if she took his side. He had never really bothered her growing up, but now she saw why Lome could not stand Artulo. Still she thought it might be best to play along until she could find Lome again. She took a deep breath and relaxed her posture. "Well, anyway," she smiled, brushing her bangs aside, "where are we going?"

"To seek my fortune of course!" he responded. "A great man with such ambition as I couldn't possibly be expected to stay in that shabby little village circling that ridiculous mud monument forever. I'm off to realize my true greatness! And I seem to be doing quite well for myself already, aren't I?" Artulo grinned. "I'm travelling to Central. I've made a deal with my uncle, and I'm sure I will create a following of admirers. Care to join, lady Juna?"

"Who's your uncle?"

"A very powerful man. Come with me and you'll find out how swimmingly we'll all get along together."

Artulo stepped forward and touched Juna's hand in a gentlemanly way, she cringed, but let him.

"I'm glad you've come to your senses. You won't regret sticking with me, Juna."

CHAPTER 21

Lome found himself being dragged from the market, while the crowd called after him with insults and threats, elbowing him in the ribs as he passed. He gripped his mother's pendant tightly in his hand. It was the only thing he had now, he'd lost his money, his dagger, Momma E, and even Juna now. He wasn't going to lose the pendant too. He grimaced at the thought of Artulo snatching his satchel away and calling him a thief. His dislike for Artulo before seemed trivial compared to this. One moment he was about to find out about his mother's pendant and the next he was being dragged away as a criminal to whatever punishment was in store.

The watch took Lome to the Magistrate's Tower, an old, crooked stone building, topped with a black spire at the edge of the town.

"In you go!" The watch opened the heavy metal doors and pushed Lome in.

It was very cramped inside the tower's base with barely enough space for the watch, Lome and the big wooden desk that took up half the room. Behind the desk was a staircase. Every few moments, a young beadle bounded up or down the stairs, balancing stacks of parchment. He wore a large burgundy cap with a big black feather in it, which bobbed with each bound.

"Another ruffian you can add to the cell, Magistrate ma'am. Might be *one of them*," said the watch.

The old pointy looking woman behind the desk stopped scribbling. She put the fluffy white quill down and looked up. Her beady eyes had large bags under them, which were windowed with circular glasses. She wore her white hair parted straight down the middle ending

in tight curls at the sides. Her piercing glare scanned Lome from foot to forehead, stopping briefly on the pendant Lome held tightly in his hand. She sneered.

"Charge?" she barked.

"Caught thieving in the market with a strange looking girl. Stole another lad's bag."

"Girl?" the Magistrate barked again.

"The lad with the purse said he knew her. They were late for some appointment with their father or whatnot. This boy tried to get her mixed up with their business."

It was all Lome could do not to object to all these accusations, but he knew Juna would be kicking him in the leg if he said anything now and so decided it was best to stay quiet.

The Magistrate locked eyes with Lome without blinking. He felt the pointy lady was imagining boring a hole right through his head. She turned a page of the large book she had been scribbling in and stabbed her quill into the inkwell as if he meant to kill it.

"Name?" she barked.

Lome stood there awkwardly, unable to remember his own name. He averted his eyes from the Magistrate's and saw the young boy with the feathered cap running down the stairs. A few parchments flew off his pile as he descended and he stopped to pick them up. Realizing he was being watched, the boy looked up at Lome, then grabbed the parchments and ran back down the stairs again.

"NAME?" barked the Magistrate.

Still Lome couldn't remember his name. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't quite spit it out. He felt his leg shaking.

"NAME?" barked the Magistrate even louder this time and the watch jabbed Lome in the back with the hilt of his sword.

"I don't have one," said Lome finally, beads of sweat trickling down his brow.

"What?" cried the Magistrate, snapping her quill in half as she pressed down on the paper. Black ink squirted out all over the table. She took off her glasses and peered at Lome.

"You have no name? What kind of abomination are you? Who do you take me for, boy? Where are you from?"

"From Thurlow, Magistrate ma'am," Lome blurted. "Please, the girl and I were travelling north, through the dead forest when we thought we would detour here. We were running out of provisions. My things were stolen from my room at Blackmere's!"

"I heard from Blackmere about you," she said. "Search this nameless boy!"

The watch searched Lome and found him empty-handed as Lome expected. His pack of provisions had been on Momma E's cart, he'd had his purse and dagger stolen and Arturo had taken his bag.

"Only this on him, Magistrate ma'am," the guard said and grabbed Lome's wrist, forcing it upwards to show the Magistrate the pendant. The vine chain dangled from his fist and the pendant swung back and forth. As the Magistrate glared at the pendant a vein nearly popped in her forehead. Lome thought she looked a little uneasy, almost scared, but then a smile crept over her face and her eyes filled with greed.

"The thief's possession will be confiscated," said the Magistrate. "Swallowtail will reward us greatly. The timing couldn't be better with the announcement he's going to make in a few days."

"No, it's my mother's! You can't take it!" cried Lome. He tried to back away, but the watch drew his blade threateningly and Lome stopped.

Just then the beadle came rushing up the stairs. Without turning around, the Magistrate reached one long spindly arm behind her back and caught the boy by the collar. He lurched forward, dropping all the parchments he had been carrying and coughing as she pulled him.

"Boy," said the Magistrate in a very sly voice. "I want you to take this thief's... possession... and secure it, then I want you to dictate a note to our friend in Central."

The beadle's jaw dropped and his eyes bulged at the sight of the pendant.

"BOY!"

"Uh, yes... yes ma'am! Ma-Magistrate, ma'am!" said the boy in a high pitched squeak, leaving the scattered parchments on the floor.

"Wait!" said the Magistrate. The beadle nearly jumped out of his skin. "Don't touch it! Here!" She threw a rag at the boy, who caught it in his shaking hands before continuing to approach Lome. He held the cloth open just under where the pendant hung by its chain, waiting for Lome to drop it in.

Lome tensed his hand. He did not want to let go, but he had no choice. The watch pressed harder into his back. "Drop it now," he said.

Reluctantly Lome opened his hand and let the pendant fall into the cloth.

"Is this it?" asked the boy in bewilderment. "Is this really the-"

"DON'T TALK TO HIM!"

Without a word, everyone watched as the beadle nervously wrapped the pendant up. His footsteps echoed throughout the corridor as he ran back downstairs, all else remained silent.

"Now," the Magistrate said finally. "Has the thief got anything else on him?"

The watch patted down Lome again. "Nothing, Magistrate, ma'am."

"Nonsense! He's got lots on him!" jeered the Magistrate as she put her glasses back on and began scribbling out Lome's crimes.

"Thievery! Lying to an official! Not carrying any proper identification! Creating mad stories! Influencing women!... Carrying illegal items!"

Illegal items? Lome thought.

"You're lucky that the Punisher is tending to other matters for the rest of the day, so you will be locked up and scheduled for correction tomorrow."

"But Magistrate... ma'am!" Lome shouted, panicked. "What about a trial?"

"I think the evidence speaks for itself," smiled the Magistrate. "No trial will be necessary. Now," she gleamed. "Think about which ear you prefer."

CHAPTER 22

After the commotion died down, Artulo took Juna by the hand and led her back to the market. She was surprised at how well he knew his way around.

"No point in staying in this small town any longer if you ask me," Artulo said.

I didn't, thought Juna, but nodded enthusiastically.

"Central is where fortunes are met, kissed on the hand, and invited to dine! We'll leave as soon as we've bought a few things. Let's start with a horse, we'll need one for me to ride on. I don't want to walk to Central."

I guess you expect me to walk, she thought.

"I've got big plans for us once we get there. Of course we must make a last stop for your friend before we leave... make sure he's all right."

Artulo seemed to test her devotion with every word he spoke. She was getting sick of listening to him. On and on he went about how life in Thurlow was so monotonous. The people spent their whole lives amongst wheat and goats and apples and clay and never did anything great. Not Artulo of course, he was destined for greatness. It was all Juna could do to even nod her head in agreement.

"I'm so glad you see where I'm coming from. I know you were just tagging along with that dimwitted, scabfaced boy, *whatshisname*, to get away from Thurlow. I wish you'd throw away that musty book of yours," Artulo reached for Juna's tome, but she swung it behind her. "I've always admired you, Juna. You don't take from anyone, you're clever. I don't know why you were tagging along with *him* as you were, but I'm so happy we're together now."

They arrived at the dealer, an Equusward who had set up a stall just outside the main market. Artulo spent quite some time in picking the finest specimen the dealer had and then wheedling him down in price.

"255 pieces for this thing? You call this a horse? I've seen mules more fit to ride! Goats with stronger knees! Dogs with better teeth! Pitiful thing, and that mane, all patchy. Malnourished I'd say! I wouldn't pay half for such an animal!"

Artulo ended up paying half for the horse, which Juna thought was perfectly fit and healthy. She wondered where he had gotten so much money from. Artulo was a master at talking his way in or out of things she soon discovered.

Coming on to late afternoon, the market was closing and slowly the large crowd and vendors dissipated. Artulo led Juna and their new horse to the pigeon post, saying that he needed to send a pigeon to Central.

"I'll also need new robes," Artulo was saying. "We can get them in Central. I'll buy you a new dress." Juna cringed at the thought of wearing a dress. She had spent her days scavenging for plants in the forest and mud of the creek. She had never worn a dress before. Still she just rolled her eyes and played along.

"I can't believe you're still wearing that thing even when he's not here," Artulo continued. "You can't show up with it in Central. They use wolves there to keep everyone in line. The fact that a simpleton like him killed it is quite intriguing."

"How do you know that?" Juna asked, the first time she'd spoken in a while.

"I just came from Central," he replied. "I travelled there as soon as you two went lollygagging in the woods..."

"If Central's so great, why did you come back?" asked Juna, trying to piece things together. "You've been following us... Did you put something in his soup?"

Artulo looked caught off guard. He tripped over his words for a moment before responding. "No..."

"Artulo!" cried Juna. She stopped walking and threw her arms to her sides. "You did put something in his soup! How could you--"

"Shush my peach," said Artulo putting his finger to her lips as he had done before. He brought out Lome's purse and dagger from his coat pocket to show her and dropped them in his satchel. "You might as well know everything now that we're going to get along. So what if I did, he's not harmed. I just did it to get closer to you... I've always had my eye on you, Juna. You're the clever one. He's not much without you really, always getting you into trouble. We could get along quite well you know."

Juna couldn't believe what she was hearing, she never imagined Artulo would do such things and she never realized Artulo saw her in this light. She now knew the reason for Lome's contempt against Artulo. It was all she could do to contain herself.

"But enough about that," continued Artulo. "Picture how I will look, wearing fine robes, riding into Central with my lady to my side. Big things are awaiting us in Central, Juna. Yes, people will remember that day and tell it to their children. The day Artulo arrived." Artulo went to pat the horse on the nose. "You'll be famous too," he said to the horse. "The horse that carried Artulo. Artulo the Audacious! Artulo the Alluring! Artulo the Admirable! Artulo the--"

Juna couldn't stand it any longer. "Atrocious!" she cried, finally speaking.

"Wait, what was that, Juna?"

WHAM! Artulo hit the ground. Juna had swung her giant tome and hit Artulo square in the face. He fell down limp, his nose bleeding.

"I said, Artulo the Atrocious," Juna repeated, smiling down at the unconscious Artulo. "That's for everything! For poisoning our soup, stealing our things, humiliating me in front of the entire market, and being... ugh."

Juna bent down and retrieved Lome's stolen satchel. She took hold of the horse's reins and started to leave, but turned to look at him once more. Blood trickled from his nose to his chin and onto his shirt. He looked pitiful. She grabbed a few coins and threw them to the ground.

"For your new robes," she said.

Artulo moaned and his eyelids fluttered, he was coming to.

"Now to find... find..." but just as Artulo, Juna again could not think of Lome's name, but she didn't have time to stop and question the logic behind it. Quickly she led the horse down the road and out of sight.