

PROLOGUE

A figure slipped from the Rif'twine Forest in the pre-dawn glow. One bony hand gripped a gnarled walking stick, the other a box wrapped in oilskin. His dark cloak camouflaged him as he hastened across the narrow stretch of land between the forest and the towering walls of Gwyndorr. But he knew first light was approaching.

The man slunk toward the Birch Grove, a stone's throw away from the town gate. Guards' voices and dogs' howls rang clearly through the crisp morning air and, as he glanced up, he could see the flicker of moving torches on the upper bailey.

The man reached the Grove and silently felt his way between the trees. Planted more than a hundred years ago, they were tall but did not grow as prolifically as the Rif'twine's plant life, and he soon found the perfect place to bury the box. He dropped to his knees, digging in the soft soil to the harder ground below. The smell of damp earth—so full of life—filled him with a pang of longing for his homeland.

His fingers ached by the time the hole was deep enough and he could lay the box in the hollow. Before he could cover it over, he heard the comfortingly familiar rustle of wings.

"Tabeal," he whispered in greeting as the red bird landed next to him, her breast glowing a warm gold. "This is the place."

Her call was soft but urgent, and he looked up to see the light patches of sky through the trees. He had taken too long.

"I know. Time is short."

He covered the box with soil, patting it down before scattering the spot with leaves to hide the evidence of his work. As he clambered back to his feet, the bird let out another low call and this time he understood more fully. The time grew short for all of them. The chains were tightening.

He retraced his steps through the Birch Grove, back to the open stretch of land between the wall and the forest.

The guards spotted the man when he was still a good distance from the forest and immediately let loose their dogs.

“He won’t be able to outrun Brute!” one burly guard shouted to his companion as they ran in pursuit.

It did not take the dogs long to reach the man. They felled him, ripping first into his cloak and then deeper into the flesh of his hands, which were stretched out protectively in a plea for mercy.

The guards laughed as his cries reached them over the rocky ground. “They’ll take a good chunk out of him before we get there.”

Suddenly the growling frenzy changed to yelps of pain. The dogs jumped away from the man as if struck by lightning, just before a convulsive shaking overtook their bodies, driving them to the ground.

“What the...?”

The guards, too, were knocked down. Later, they would be unable to explain the force that brought it about. A shattering sound pulsed deep into their heads, as waves of searing pain assaulted them. Eventually the agony overtook them, and they slipped into dark oblivion.

When they came around, they could not tell how much time had passed. Their heads ached as if they had drunk too much mead the previous night. The whimpering dogs slunk towards their masters, tails between their legs. There was no sign of the man. Only chunks of his woolen cloak and a few drops of blood showed where the dogs had taken him down.