

The Lake



Brianna hesitated. The lake wasn't as innocent as it looked. There was a reason for its semblance of peace — the deadly creatures that roamed beneath, deterring whoever dared to approach.

They were sacred creatures, at least that was what Teilo told her. "They protect the lake from uninvited intruders, including myself."

He grinned a wide grin as he said it.

According to Teilo, the whole, enclosed land was sacred and protected — not just by the high cliffs and the deep canyon that guarded the place like an impregnable castle, but there was some mysterious power within the land that repelled any unwelcome visitors. Teilo could roam the place in the role of messenger, but the sacred Dome of the Oracle would take no notice of him — as far as he was concerned, the Dome was just a damp, dark cave. Neither did the lake creatures regard him as special. They would devour him with no more mercy than for an unfortunate bird quenching its thirst with its waters.

The shore was craggy in places, but Teilo led her to a long, flat rock that had one end overhanging quite a way into the lake.

He jumped onto it, and immediately the creatures gathered around him as if they were drawn by the smell of flesh and blood. With their bared teeth and scaly skin of drab green, they bore the ugly and substantial look of a crocodile but with the agility and tenacity of a deadly shark.

One arm outstretched, palm out, he stood like a dancer anticipating his partner.

She took his hand and shifted her right foot forward. When the tip of her foot touched the surface of the water, she wobbled as if she was stepping onto an unsteady stool. The feel of Teilo's firm grip was reassuring, so she shifted more weight onto it.

To her utter astonishment, as well as delight, she didn't sink. Instead, a crystal plaque was formed where her foot was in contact with the water and grew in size as she pressed her weight on to it.

It was just like in the picture on the rectangular plate — the girl walking on the surface of the lake to reach the centre.

At her second step, she let go of Teilo's hand.

The lake was reassuring. The crystallisation was simply magic. Without her slightest perception, here it was, under her foot, and there it went, the instant her foot was lifted.

Every step was like a miracle, and her mind was full of fluttering butterflies that were difficult to contain. She felt like laughing wildly.

But she resisted the urge. The monsters beneath had been following her like shadows, their razor-sharp teeth flashing ominously — it's a simple procedure, but any mistake would lead to deadly consequences.

She walked faster as if she were racing the shadows. In no time, she was at the centre of the lake where a gigantic plant floated. The plant itself resembled a large flower, with its giant purple leaves curving outwards like a lily's petals. Out of the multi-layered leaves, a thick, silvery stalk reached up skywards, holding a white flower bud that was tightly shut.

As she moved closer, the stalk swayed under the weight of the bud it was carrying. Stretching her arm up, she nudged the bud with the tip of a finger. The bud shook and opened

at the touch, as if by magic. In a blink, it had blossomed fully into a delicate flower, and nestled within it was a pearl the size of a small marble, swaying like a large dewdrop in the morning breeze.

This must be the thing the girl was supposed to collect.

Without delay, she took the pearl, rolled it into her palm and pressed it with her fingers. A cool, marvellously refreshing sensation pervaded her hand and her arm and entranced her.

Her captivated mind awoke suddenly to a low murmuring sound, vague and indistinct, permeating the lake and beyond. Alarmed, she looked around.

The hills stood, calm and solemn, but the serenity of the lake was disintegrating. The water was getting unruly and choppy although the air was utterly still.

The murmuring was growing louder and angrier. She could now tell the types of noises in the tumult — the clank of metal, heavy steps and breathing. There was something else — she strained her ears.

All of a sudden she shivered. Bokwas, seething with their bodies squirming, flashed into her mind like a tap being switched open. So many of them, she could feel it, under the stones and trees, writhing their way through and worming their way out.

Standing on the same rock, Teilo hadn't moved since she went across the water. Something twinkled among the trees not far behind where he was standing.

Swords! Arrows!

"Teilo!" she cried and broke into a run.

The crystal plates quivered under her feet, and the waves grew rougher. At once she sensed the troubled mind of the lake. "Peril, peril!" it seemed to be hissing, and every smashing wave was a sign of its turmoil and despair — the land was contaminated.

"Destroy! Destroy!"

She ran, faster than she thought she could. Teilo's outstretched arms were just a few more strides away.

To her horror, the water in front split open at her feet. Without even a struggle, she tumbled into its murky green abyss, and the water closed above her.

Floundering she plunged deeper. In dread and bewilderment, she found herself caught by something large. With its teeth sinking into her thigh, she was trapped and dragged down. Before she touched the bottom of the lake, a white shadow swam past her, and the next moment the grip on her thigh was released. A cloud of blood rose and danced, enveloped in which was the bleeding body of a dark lake monster. A distance away, a large-finned white beast was staring back at her.

The water darkened as if angered by the savage slaughter of its scared creature. A treacherous underwater current formed, tossing and carrying everything in its path. Monsters tumbled and rolled, and she went along with them, her face slamming into the tail of one creature and her feet rasped by the fins of another.

Soon her strength started to abandon her, and disoriented she couldn't tell where she was heading. When her arms were pulled and her waist was grasped, she didn't resist. The hands holding her were firm, and the current was now spinning them upwards. All at once fresh air burst into her tight chest. She gasped and coughed.

Teilo was with her, his arms wrapped around her waist.

The realisation brought her no comfort. She was startled by the thunderous noise, the rushing wind, and the beads and drops of water that splattered and smashed into her face. The lake was rotating wildly in big circles, like a basin of water stirred by the unruly hand of a giant, and forming a whirling updraft.

In the tumultuous mayhem she was dazed, struggling to comprehend — the updraft, like a tornado of water, was carrying them forcefully upwards.

Among all the chaos, the firm grip of Teilo's hands had not faltered. His water-splotched face was furrowed in concentration.

"Hold tight," he shouted into her ear.

As his voice trailed off in the clamour, a large shadow shot towards them. She heard the resounding crash, the fluttering of the giant wings, and the plaintive cry of Yuna.

At once she was jerked forward. Through the thick wall of water droplets she flew, into the fresh air that was crisp and dry.

She must have screamed though she had no recollection of that later, except for a burning sensation in her throat. Hands clinging onto Teilo's arm, legs dangling helplessly, she was numbed with horror.

Yuna was in trouble. She could tell from the shuddering that went with every beat of her wings and the unbalanced way she flew.

Yuna gave out another penetrating cry, and Brianna felt them dropping, as the ground and the sky started alternating before her eyes. Yuna cried again, flapping her wings arduously, in a desperate attempt to pull upwards.

The final drop came without a warning. In the matter of seconds, they plunged to the ground below.

Landing on Yuna's soft body, Brianna was the least hurt. As she slipped down, she caught the sight of Teilo, scrambling to his feet. As soon as he was on his feet he staggered towards them.

His eyebrows were twisted, and his face was a mask of pain. At first sight, she thought he must have been injured from the fall. But when he thrust past her, ignoring her concerned gesture, and flung himself onto the ground next to Yuna, she knew that he was suffering for her — Yuna.

Yuna was bleeding again. A blotch of blood gathered below her injured breast, and one wing was folded under it. Hastily Teilo put his arms under her scaly body, and frantically struggled to lift her. She joined him.

Despair was thick in the air. Without turning her head, she saw them marching towards them, their suits of armour glinting, their faces taut behind shields, swords in their belts and bows in their hands.

When the wing unfolded from under her chest, Yuna gave out a mournful cry.

"Fly, Yuna, fly," Teilo pleaded.

Yuna's long neck lifted, displaying its proud, graceful curve. For a moment, they looked into each other's eyes.

Teilo smiled tenderly, as his hands stroked her. "Good girl, fly away ... fly away now."

Yuna honked, tucking her chest in.

"I know, Yuna, I know. I will be fine like I always am. You must fly, back to your home to recover. I'll find you there. I promise."

There was an alarming whoosh of air as arrows sped past them.

"Go, go!" Teilo shouted, giving Yuna a shove. Yuna thrust forwards and flapped her giant wings. Another shrill honk and she took off. A few yards further forward, she staggered and tilted sharply to the right. But the instant she was about to crash to the ground she pulled up, soaring skyward.

Arrows flew after her and narrowly missed as she gained height.

Teilo's face brightened. Turning to Brianna, he shouted, "What are you waiting for? Run! Run!"



The good thing about heavily armoured soldiers is that they cannot run fast. After the last few arrows landed clattering behind their heels, they knew they were out of their reach.

Safe, for the moment.

Trudging through the alternating areas of thick vegetation and craggy rocks, Teilo led the way up towards a cliff top. They stopped just once, to allow Brianna to catch her breath.

"Where is the pearl?" he asked.

"Inside here." She flourished the locket hanging around her neck — after all that tumbling, she couldn't think of a place safer than that.

"You haven't swallowed it?" said Teilo, frowning.

She was startled, and for a while, gazed at him, expecting the tense face to melt into a grin, and for him to say all that talk about 'swallowing' was nothing but a joke.

But Teilo's face was a mask of stubbornness. "You should have swallowed it," he persisted.

"A pearl, you want me to swallow a pearl! What will happen if I swallow it?"

"You don't know?" he asked, arching his brows.

He looked genuinely surprised. But why should she know?

"Did you see the white marble stones in the Dome?" he asked.

She blushed. She did look carefully at the first one, but as for the rest, she hardly registered them — the sparkling gown had caught her eye and distracted her —

Thinking back, she could vaguely conjure a picture in her mind. It was a picture of the same girl spreading her arms wide. It had struck her as similar to one of da Vinci's drawings, the one that depicts a man, circumscribed by a circle, stretching out his limbs. In the picture, the girl was in almost the same pose.

What's the significance of a girl spreading her arms?

"If you had swallowed the pearl, you would be transformed," Teilo said.

It was now even more mystifying. Her eyes grew wide as she asked, "Transformed into what?"

"A targar woman."

"A targar woman?"

"That's what Tyanna was, a targar woman — half-targar, half-woman."

He abruptly resumed walking. Mindlessly she shuffled her legs in his wake, her mind whirling with questions.

"Why should I do that?" she asked, genuinely puzzled.

"To take the place of Tyanna."

The answer was forthright and simple, and the expectation it conveyed was blunt and disconcerting. An upsurge of frustration overtook her.

That's it. All those comments about how she looked like Tyanna, and how she was the one. It turned out that they wanted her to be transformed and just to be her.

The idea of her being half-bird half-woman sounded bizarre and idiotic. She would, of course, respect and admire such a being, like anybody else. But being one herself was just too weird to take it seriously.

"What if I don't want to be a tar ... targar woman" she said, stuttering at the unfamiliar term.

He cast her a look so sharp and intense. "Then you must return the pearl to the lake. The pearl should never fall into the hands of anyone other than a targar woman," he said and turned away from her.

She was disquieted. She could tell that he had spoken through gritted teeth. After that, he gathered speed, almost too fast to keep pace with. Soon they took a sharp turn and came to a path hemmed in by groves of trees. All of a sudden he froze, one arm extending backwards in a gesture of warning.

Alarmed, she stopped short. The air was still. She could hear a rustling sound coming from the shrubs, low and subtle, but under her strained senses, it grew louder as if there were many trembling hands in the thickets.

When something thin and long sprang towards her chest from a low bush, she jerked with a cry and flung it to the ground with a frantic swing of her arm. It flopped down onto the ground half a yard away from her feet.

She recognised it at once — bokwa, the snake that has claws — and was intrigued. It was not the first time she had come across one. She had seen Jack fighting with them in the arena, and she herself had been bitten by one, but this was the first one she had confronted face to face within arm's reach.

She was struck by the smoothness of its brown, cylindrical body, the peculiar way its upper half was lifted by its claws, and the round glassy eyes that stared at her like the innocent eyes of a child.

She gazed in wonderment and extended her hand towards it.

Had her action been captured on camera, and had she had the chance to watch it later on, she would be boggle-eyed with shock. It was reckless and silly to try to touch a bokwa — had she lost her mind?

But she knew she did it with calm and deliberation, as if she were entrusting herself to something divine and powerful. At that specific moment, her mind was inquisitive and fluttering with marvellous thoughts.

The bokwa was alarmed at the approaching hand. Its body arched stiffly; from below its protruding jaw came strange clanking sounds.

Her hand didn't reach as far as the bokwa. A stone fished from Teilo's pouch flew from his hand and hit the serpent just as it was about to leap at her, and broke the spell. The clanking sound was silenced and the bokwa dropped dead, but soon more clanking sounds rose all around them.

Teilo grasped her hand and hauled her at a brisk run back down to the gravelled path they had just marched up.

"I almost touched it, did you see that? I wasn't even afraid." She exclaimed breathlessly, dwelling on the aftermath of the excitement, and let Teilo lead her, paying little heed to where they were going.

Then abruptly her mind was drawn to the downhill path they were on. "Are we heading down?" she asked, puzzled.

Teilo halted, and his face resumed an attentive look, like an alert school teacher. Without warning, he clutched her by the shoulder and shoved her into the undergrowth by the path. As he did so, he uttered a "Shh ..." sound from his pursed lips to silence her. The instant she flattened herself to the ground, she felt the heavy footfalls.

It didn't take long before the sturdy boots of a cohort of soldiers appeared. Trudging along the rocky path, they were led by a large man wearing a tall helmet, an extra pair of shoulder

plates and a long sword. Their knee plates were obviously causing trouble and made them walk in a stiff, robotic manner.

They watched them with bated breath as they marched past and vanished behind some tall rocks.

“What shall we do now?” Brianna whispered, giving in to a shiver. The place was now full of marching soldiers and slithering bokwas.

“To the top.”

He answered simply and with no more ado. She asked no more though doubts had grown in her mind.

How was going to the top where the soldiers were heading, and perhaps the bokwas were waiting, going to help.

They returned to the path and walked along it for a short distance before switching to a lane concealed by dense bushes. The lane took them to a clearing where the ground was made almost entirely of one giant piece of rock.

Teilo stamped his feet on the solid ground and glanced at her with satisfaction. “At least it will take a while for the bokwas to get here,” he said and advanced towards the hill ahead.

The hill he was heading for had a long, straggling crack that looked like a ghastly sword wound inflicted by a colossal hand. It ran from top to bottom cutting the hill in half. Teilo was striding towards the crevice. Soon he was at the entrance, and without a word he squeezed himself into the opening. His sturdy figure slipped into the dark shade of the crack.

Not keen to be left alone, she hurriedly followed him, edging forward with hands and feet, once or twice holding her breath and sucking in her tummy to negotiate the narrow gap.

The confined space grew wider as she proceeded further. The vertical rocky walls on either side expanded forwards and upwards. Before her, buried in shadow, large rocks piled up like giant disordered steps stretching upwards.

Teilo lifted himself up onto a square-shaped rock almost as tall as himself. Standing upright, he turned and gazed down at her. Towering above her on the rock, and transfigured by a light beam that slanted down from somewhere above, he struck her as a peculiar statue.

“Here we are, the path to heaven,” said the statue, grinning.

