

THE  
UNFETTERED  
CHILD



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Michael C. Sahl

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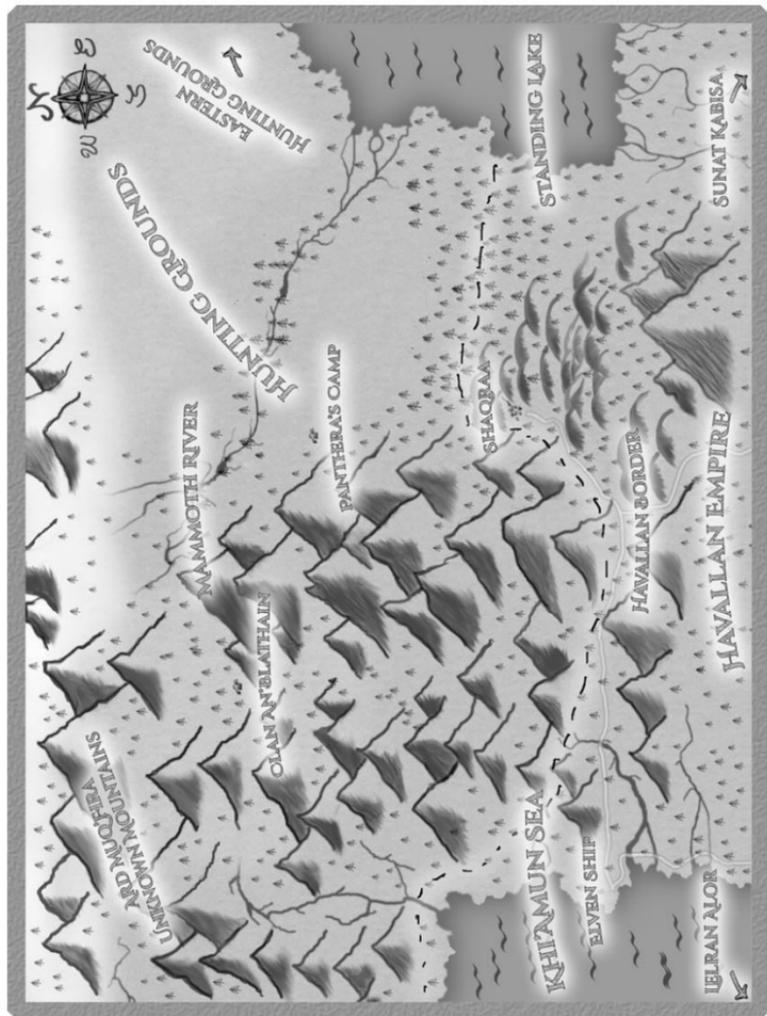
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**MICHAEL C. SAHD**





# THE BEGINNING

*“In all the countless moons of my life, I have never met an elf, Abizou.”* The strong, deep voice emanated from what seemed to be a human skeleton into a throne room that appeared richly decorated, yet devoid of life.

Even as it spoke, the skeleton sat motionless on its marble throne, its bones loosely wrapped in gold-embroidered, red-and-white silk robes. Gold and marble made up the decor of the grand room as well, with scatterings of white banners that each featured a red sun.

*They are treacherous, Abdhul. Almost as treacherous as you,* said a woman’s voice, as if from nowhere.

*“Come now, Abizou, you’ve been with us for ages. Stop being bitter.”* The skull turned slowly to gaze sightlessly upon a round, blue, faceted gem resting on a red velvet pillow. Two pinpoint of light glowed red in the hollows of its eyes. *“No matter. What do you suppose the elves want? I couldn’t discern it with my magic.”*

*Elves have powerful mages who put shields in place to protect against any such divinations. Also, they’re not known to parley with lesser beings,* said the woman’s voice, apparently originating from the gem.

The skeleton’s gaze turned back to the wide double doors that stood at the entrance of the hall. The sound of

distant horns carried over the muffled din of the city, marking the approach of the elves.

The lich stood, pulling itself up with a staff cast of copper and silver, a red gem set into its top. No sooner had it taken a step down the dais than a yellow halo enveloped it. Like a strange liquid, muscle flowed around its bones, then flesh filled out its draping robes.

Now, in front of the throne stood a strong, handsome, olive-skinned man. He looked over at the blue stone sitting next to the throne and smiled. "I'm pleased the elves realize that we are not lesser beings," Havelle said, gazing admiringly at his new skin.

If the stone could have scoffed, it would have. Instead, it remained silent.

Havelle stepped to the right of the throne. Flattening his robes with his hands, he said, "I think, perhaps, I sleep too much."

*Your lineage manages the empire just fine without you,* said Abizou.

After hundreds of years, Havelle sighed for the first time. Enjoying the sensation, he sighed again.

*Troubles?* asked the gem.

"Troubles? No, I'm just enjoying the sensations of having a body." He smiled wickedly at the gem.

*That's hardly funny,* the gem said dryly.

"It's a little funny," Havelle replied.

*Havelle, don't taunt me. You've kept me trapped in this gem serving your empire for thousands of years. Release me,* the gem pleaded.

"But Abizou, what would I do without you?" Havelle teased. The gem didn't respond. Havelle sighed again. Abizou was in one of her moods, he reflected.

“Perhaps one day, Abizou. But your body is gone; you would need to find a new one. Releasing you without a body would destroy you within days,” he said seriously.

Abizou had no time to respond. The doors from behind the dais opened, and an entourage of imperial guards wearing polished breastplates with the Havallan red sun emblazoned on their chests marched out. Each one took a position on either side of the hall in evenly spaced rows.

When they looked up at the throne and noticed Havelle standing there, they placed their palms on the sun and took a knee.

Shortly afterward, a man in similar robes to Havelle’s followed the entourage, flanked by two more guards. They, too, bowed before the throne, but not before shock registered on their faces.

Havelle chuckled. The man dressed similarly to Havelle also shared many of his facial features, although he looked older. “My lord! I did not expect to see you. You honor me.”

“Stand up, Khalil.” Havelle smiled. “You are the emperor. I’m here only as an advisor.”

Emperor Khalil stood, walked to the throne, and sat. “Do you expect trouble, my lord?”

“I hope not, my child,” Havelle said, resting a hand on his descendant’s shoulder.

“We have set up outposts all along the Crescent Sea and driven the elves out of Havalla.” Khalil chuckled. “I believe the elves are here to beg for peace.”

Havelle patted his shoulder. “You’ve done well, Emperor. How are the children?”

“They are well, my lord,” Khalil said, then bowed his head. “You would do me a great honor to come see them.”

“I will see them when your eldest son comes of age,” Havelle said.

Khalil’s face dropped. “Yes, my lord.”

“However, Abizou tells me your eldest daughter is becoming quite a mage.” Havelle saw the emperor’s eyes light up.

“My lord, Samara has grown to be a remarkable woman—top of her class. She is making great strides for our empire. Currently, she negotiates trade with the primitive nomads to the north.”

“When she returns, I will make her my apprentice. It’s been hundreds of years since I’ve taken one,” Havelle said, smiling at his descendant.

“My lord! You honor me greatly,” Khalil said, just as horns sounded right outside the front doors, filling the throne room.

Havelle nodded at Khalil and stepped to the back corner of the throne. Khalil’s voice boomed across the hall, “Let our guests in.” Every guard in the room stood in unison, and the two closest to the doors hustled over to open them.

Sunlight spilled in, brightening the throne room and causing the red suns to sparkle like fire opals.

At first, Havelle could see nothing but the clay plaster, lapis, and gold of the city beyond. Then the top of a palanquin appeared as it ascended the stairs to the throne room, followed by the bright blue headscarves that draped over the bearers’ faces. Havelle could tell by their build that they were humans, and a couple of them had Havallan skin color.

The bearers carried the palanquin into the throne room. Other than the scarves, they wore nothing but loincloths, and their feet were cracked and blistered. As they placed the litter onto the floor, they exposed their whip-scarred backs. Khalil sucked air through his teeth. His grandfather had abolished slavery in the Havallan Empire during his rule.

Havelle, on the other hand, cared little whether his empire employed slavery or not; however, the idea that two of his subjects were slaves to the elves rankled him somewhat.

From the palanquin, an almost-naked Havallan woman wearing a bright green headscarf walked to the base of the stairs that led to the throne. Standing tall, she announced, "The magnificent Illtud and his apprentice, Zayra!" She then stepped out of the way, turned to the litter, and prostrated herself on the floor.

A tall, pale creature glanced at his surroundings as he emerged from the carriage. His large, green eyes and long, pointy ears reminded Havelle of a hairless feline's. The elf smirked and sang something to someone still in the litter.

As he walked across the hall to the bottom of the dais steps, his blue-and-green robes swished their brightly colored feathers and clinked their intricately carved wooden charms together. A similarly dressed elven woman trailed behind him.

He sang something to Emperor Khalil. The Havallan woman lifted herself to her knees and translated, "Illtud The Magnificent says that he has come for your surrender." Khalil stared at the Havallan woman, slightly

shocked; then his laughter spilled across the room like falling dominoes.

Havelle noticed the bored expression on Illtud's face. The elf sang some words and danced his arms around himself in a magical pattern familiar to Havelle. Lightning arced from the elf to each Havallan guard in the room.

Havelle reacted quickly, slamming his staff on the floor. The lightning changed direction and gathered into a crackling ball in front of him. The guards fell back from the force of the blow but were otherwise spared from their destruction.

Havelle then levitated off the floor and said, in the language of the Malaikah, the language of magic, "How dare you come into my home bearing such insults?" The Havallan guards drew their swords, and Khalil stood, red with anger. Havelle waved them back, and they returned to the walls.

Illtud glared at him and shot up into the air. In Havallan, he said, "You humans are impetuous creatures. I look forward to breaking you. I could use a parlor mage." He then commanded the ball of lightning to fly up and strike Havelle. The room flared into a bright light, and everyone covered their eyes.

When the light cleared, Havelle floated there, his flesh spell broken, a skeleton once more. The Havallans in the room gasped, as did the female elf. Even Illtud looked surprised. Havelle's robes seemed unscathed, but he dusted them off anyway.

*"That was incredibly rude,"* the lich said, his lifeless jaw inert. He flicked his hand in Illtud's direction. A tiny, bright red ball of light shot at the elf and hit him right in the chest. Upon impact, it exploded and knocked everyone on the ground backward.

The elf flew through the air and hit the wall above the doors to the exit, then dropped to the ground. Although his decorative feathers still smoldered and his robes still burned, he landed nimbly on his feet in a crouch.

Illtud stood up angrily, flinging his hand over his head as if throwing a spear. A massive icicle appeared and shot Havelle, piercing him to the wall, where he slumped.

Khalil shouted, "Impossible!" dismay elongating his face. He stared up at the unmoving bones of Abdhul Havelle, his ancient ancestor and the founder of the Havallan Empire. All the Havallans in the room froze in horror.

In his singsong voice, Illtud said to his apprentice, in Havallan, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Capture them all." Then he walked toward his palanquin, chuckling.

"Kill them!" Khalil commanded. His guards nervously stepped forward with their swords drawn.

Then Zayra spoke for the first time, her words like the notes of a mellifluous song. Golden nets appeared above the guards, then dropped, trapping them in a magical mesh. She turned to Emperor Khalil and prepared to cast the same spell on him.

Khalil reached over and seized a sword from one of his trapped guards just as a net appeared over him. He leaped out from under it as it fell toward him, then rolled to the feet of the female elf. He stabbed at her, but his blade stopped short against an invisible shield.

Zayra stepped back and sent a blast of energy at Khalil, striking him in the shoulder. As he stumbled back, he swiped his sword at the elf, leaving a gash on her

cheek this time. She gasped and glared at the human angrily.

Illtud sang to Zayra, and she spat on the ground in response. In Havallan, she said, “No, I’ll take care of him.”

Laughter rang out around the room. “*Fool,*” boomed Havelle, and Illtud stopped just short of entering his litter.

Havelle floated directly above him. The nets that trapped the Havallans shot away, then turned into massive skeletal claws that captured both elves and lifted them into the air, within inches of Havelle’s pinpoint, glowing, red eyes, their arms pinned tightly to their sides.

“*You,*” he said to Illtud, “*I will punish for eternity.*” For the first time in his long elven life, fear played across Illtud’s face.

Havelle floated down to the blue gem. “*Abizou, I’ll miss you,*” he said.

*Are you freeing me?* Abizou asked.

“*Yes, Abizou. This gem will be home to a new inhabitant,*” Havelle said, picking up the sapphire. “*Unfortunately, that of a lesser being.*”

From behind Havelle, Illtud shouted something, and the skeletal hand holding him dissipated, but before his feet could touch the ground, Havelle turned and sliced through the air with his hand. The elf flew backward, punched by an invisible force. He lay unconscious on the floor, and Khalil advanced on him, sword raised to strike off his head.

“*Wait, Khalil!*” Havelle said over the frantic songs of the female elf. Khalil sneered at the unconscious elf, but lowered his sword. Floating toward Khalil and the prone elf, Havelle commanded the guards to bind Illtud, which

they promptly did, untying the palanquin-bearing slaves and using the ropes that had held them.

Bringing the gem close to his face, Havelle said, *“Listen closely, Abizou. You will not be able to return to the Malaikah, and you’ll only have a short time to find an appropriate body. I wish you luck.”*

*I thank you, Havelle. I already have plans,* Abizou said.

Havelle placed the gem on Illtud’s body, then thumped the ground directly above the elf’s head with his staff. A violet light sprouted where the staff had struck.

Khalil and his guards backed away as Havelle used the staff to slowly draw a circle of violet light around himself and Illtud. He chanted in a low, deep voice, using the language of the Malaikah once again.

When he had completed the circle, he lifted his staff and slammed it down onto the gem, driving it into the elf’s stomach. Illtud gasped but did not wake. A yellow light spread out from the blue gem, illuminating the room in a sickly color. As Havelle lifted the staff, a violet light followed, as if the staff had pulled it from the gem.

When he moved the staff away, the violet light continued to rise in a swirling, purple twister. From the waist up, a regal, beautiful woman appeared.

*I will find a body, Havelle, and I will return. Perhaps sooner than you think.* Abizou’s words drifted into Havelle’s mind. *I think Khalil’s daughter, Samara, will do nicely.* Then she swirled back into the light, dashed out the door, and headed north.

Anger filled Havelle, but the djinn retreated so quickly that he had no time to respond. He could only pray that his distant granddaughter would have the strength to

defend herself from the weakened Malaikah. He continued chanting, then raised his staff once more. Illtud and the now-empty gem rose into the air, the elf hanging limply. Havelle reached into his robes and pulled out a dagger. With it, he slit the elf's throat, letting the blood spill onto the gem.

Zayra, still trapped in her bony prison, screamed in anguish. As Illtud's blood poured out, a weak, violet light seeped out along with it. Neither the light nor the blood dripped past the gem; rather, both were absorbed into it. Havelle continued to chant as the blood slowly fell.

What seemed like hours later, but was in fact only minutes, Havelle finished, and the circle of violet light snuffed out. Zayra floated in her prison, sobbing. "*Khalil, take this elf's body and impale it on the highest point along the edge of the Crescent Sea.*"

Khalil placed his palm on the center of his chest and bowed. "With pleasure, my lord." He commanded two of his guards to carry the body away, and they dragged it off.

Those who remained in the room were accosted by a mental wail, and Illtud's singsong voice rang out in their heads. *What's this? What have you done?* Then the wail returned.

Havelle chuckled in response to Illtud's panic. He turned to the female elf. "*You're fortunate.*" He floated up to her and stroked her cheek with a bony finger. "*I'm going to let you live, but you're going to take this.*" He reached out, and the blue gem floated over to his hand. "*You're going to share it with your people as a warning.*"

His skeletal finger traced down her throat to the center of her chest, then he clutched her robes violently. Red light surrounded the two of them, followed by the briny

scent of the ocean. When the radiance cleared, they stood on the edge of a grassy field with the Crescent Sea lapping against a sandy beach nearby.

Havelle threw the elf to the ground and tossed the gem at her feet. *"Do not return to my kingdom,"* he said. Then the red light surrounded him. When it faded, Havelle was gone. Zayra picked up the gem that held her master, his mental anguish still echoing inside her head.

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A scream reverberated across the snow-covered plains, carried by the wind and disturbing an otherwise peaceful night. A white rabbit jumped at the sound, then skittered back into its hole.

When the shriek reached a herd of mammoths, the bull looked above the huddled mass and huffed, as if to somehow ward it off. Then the last echo died in the cloudless night and only the wind remained, tossing up funnels of snow and whispering across the flat expanse.

Investigating the source of the sound, an owl flew over an encampment of yurts clustered around a smoldering fire pit. Within the camp, the muffled sounds of human muttering seeped through the leather walls.

One dwelling glowed with an inner light, and from within this dwelling, another scream escaped into the night. One of the horses picketed outside the camp snorted and pawed at the ground, and the owl retreated into the darkness, a shrinking silhouette against the starry sky.

Across these plains, Orin raced through the night. Snow kicked up under his horse's hooves before they sank back down, deep below the powdery surface. Mist escaped the beast's flared nostrils, and he felt the animal's chest heave beneath him, its lather collecting under his hide breeches. He kicked harder; there was no time to waste.

In the distance, he saw his encampment rise out of the snow. The screams that carried across the wind meant that his wife, Natalia, still lived, but the pain reflected in those screams made his heart sink. *I must hurry*, he thought, kicking the horse still harder, urging it to an even greater speed in his desperation.

An olive-skinned woman clung to his back, her white robes flapping behind her, blending in with the snow. She was a priestess and a healer from a nearby Havallan outpost. Orin had retrieved her to save the lives of his wife and unborn child.

Natalia had fallen from her horse the previous day, and although she had no open wounds, she had bled heavily, and had then gone into labor. She was a couple of moons too early for labor, and the abnormal bleeding had left her weak and swooning whenever she had stood up or tried to walk.

Orin, chief of the Panthera tribe, had ordered his people to set up camp that evening on the open plains. Normally, the tribe would have found a more sheltered area in which to erect their yurts, and his premature order had caused more than a little displeasure among his tribesmen; however, considering the circumstances, they had reluctantly complied.

The tribe's shaman, Signia, had examined Natalia while Orin had waited impatiently outside. After a short

time, Sigmia had come out and informed him that both his wife and child would probably die. Desperate, he had fled to the Havallans to ask them to use their healing magic to help.

After hearing his plea, Samara, the Havallan priestess behind him, had offered her assistance. While rapidly gathering her tools, she had explained to him that her doctrine demanded she always help those in need; then she had followed him to his horse.

When the pair arrived at the camp, others in the tribe peeked out of their yurts and whispered disapprovingly to each other. Gritting his teeth, Orin glared at those who made eye contact. His wife was dying, and they had no business challenging their chief's judgment.

He pulled the horse to a complete stop as close to his home as possible. He leaped off his mount and helped the priestess down, carrying her on his back the final few steps to his yurt.

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Natalia squeezed Orin's hand, her nails digging into his skin. Despite the blood trickling down his arm and the pain, he resisted the urge to pull away. She lay on a leather mat, with bowls of paste and other oddities surrounding her. Her chest heaved, and every so often, the severe pain of labor arched her spine into the air. Fear ate at him as he watched his wife in this condition.

With every contraction, Orin squeezed her hand with concern. "Natalia, are you alright?" She stared past him, grimacing. Her lack of coherency frightened him. Worry

carved deep lines on his forehead, while his long, black beard hid his frown.

The priestess, Samara Havelle, examined Natalia; she felt her forehead, then checked her eyes and birthing points.

Sigmia leaned over to Orin and said, under her breath, “You shouldn’t have brought this outsider here.” Her face was wrinkled with age, and her deep frown only added to those wrinkles.

Orin glared at her. “You said you couldn’t do anything for her.”

Sighing, the shaman said, “I couldn’t. But the spirits should decide Natalia’s fate. What this outsider will do is not the way of our people. The spirits will be unhappy.”

Before Orin could voice his retort, the priestess said, “Is the life of this woman less important than the spirits’ happiness?” Her accent was heavy, but Sigmia understood.

“You don’t know the ways of our people, outsider. The power you steal belongs to the spirits, and it should be their decision whether it’s used,” Sigmia said.

“You don’t know the ways of magic, wise shaman. Please allow me to do what the gods have given me the right to do,” Samara said, gently wiping sweat from Natalia’s brow.

“Your gods are not ours,” Sigmia said. Looking down at the suffering Natalia, Sigmia’s resolve broke, and she sighed. “Do what you must. However, tomorrow the tribe must continue on, Orin.” The shaman left the yurt, awkward silence following her out.

Samara interrupted Orin’s brooding by saying, “I must use magic to save the woman. I may not be able to save the child though.”

Orin grasped her shoulder and turned her to face him. "Please try. I beg you." Seeing the desperation in his deep blue eyes, the priestess could do nothing but nod.

He watched her hands move busily under the towel draped over Natalia's thighs. Samara had somehow healed her wounds, for she was not as pale as before. Yet labor still hammered her, despite the dawn's light peeking through the entrance of the yurt. She breathed heavily, blowing out on each exhale.

Glancing at Orin, she gave him a smile that barely emerged from her grimace. He returned her smile, but worry still showed on his forehead. The administrations the priestess had given Natalia had done something, but he still feared for his wife and child.

Natalia released another long scream as a contraction surfaced. Her eyes glazed over, and she arched her back in pain. Her hair clung to her cheeks and neck, dripping with sweat. Orin peered down at her, his brow furrowed in consternation, but she shook her head, as if to say, "Don't worry."

With a frown, the priestess knelt between her legs, focusing on the birthing. Her closed eyes moved rapidly beneath their lids. Muttering in her Havallan tongue, the priestess reached over the towel and placed her hand on Natalia's stomach. Orin had no idea what her words meant or what strange ritual she was performing, but if she saved the baby, he would accept anything.

She reached into her bag and pulled out another towel, which she bundled underneath Natalia. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Bobbing her head up and down, Natalia groaned an affirmation on an exhale.

Grasping one of the pregnant woman's feet, Samara looked at Orin and indicated with her eyebrows for him to take the other foot. He knelt across from the priestess, complying with her unspoken order. Samara said, "Alright, jameel. Push!"

Natalia's face turned scarlet, and every muscle in her body tensed. Screaming as she pushed, she gripped handfuls of the hide beneath her. Despite his strength, Orin had to lean heavily into her leg to prevent it from straightening.

Shaking her head, the priestess said, "Relax. I want you to push harder next time." Natalia gave her a hard gaze, as if to say, "I'm pushing as hard as I can." The priestess chuckled and said, "You can do it." She looked under the towel. "Ready? Push!" Again Natalia pushed, to no effect.

After numerous ineffectual pushes, the priestess solemnly told Natalia, who lay breathing heavily on the sweat-drenched mat, "If you don't push the child out, it will die. You must push harder."

Through gritted teeth, Natalia said, "I'm trying." She pushed again, her neck stretching out, displaying every muscle.

A smile grew on the priestess's face. "That's it, jameel. Push!" Natalia's birthing canal stretched, and a small, wrinkly mound peeked through. "Harder!" the priestess shouted.

Eyes wide, Orin squeezed his wife's foot. Natalia paused, took two deep breaths, and pushed harder. The mound protruded farther, and a slightly hairy head appeared. Soon after that, a whole wrinkly baby squeezed out.

Samara, working quickly, used the towel to pick up the slight bundle, then folded the umbilical cord over a knife, cutting it. She tied off the cord and finished up the birthing process.

The baby wasn't breathing, so, holding the infant in one hand, she gently slapped its rear. The baby didn't respond. No crying, no gasping for air; the child lay still.

"No," Natalia said through a hiccup, her eyes wet with tears.

Passing his gaze between Natalia and the priestess, Orin asked, "What's wrong?" Panic rose in his voice as he shouted his question again. "What's wrong?"

Wiping the baby off, the priestess considered ways to revive the child. She reached into her bag and pulled out what appeared to be seeds. Transferring them to the hand underneath the child, she uttered a few words, and the seeds crumbled into dust. She traced symbols in the air above the infant with her other hand.

After this failed, the priestess turned to Orin. "Too late." She looked to the ground and said, "I'm sorry, but I have failed." She passed the bundle to its mother's outstretched arms.

"My baby. Oh, my baby," Natalia wailed, rocking the girl back and forth.

Orin hugged her. "I tried, my love. I did what I could." He lowered his head to her shoulder, crying softly.

As sad as he felt, he was still glad that the priestess had saved his wife's life. He hugged her tighter. They had been trying for a child for some time, with no success. This wasn't right. The spirits shouldn't be so cruel.

He stood and grabbed his cloak. "Orin, where are you going?" Natalia asked.

“I don’t know. I need to think.” He flung his cloak around his shoulders.

“Please, Orin. Stay,” Natalia said. Turning, he stared into her pleading eyes. He should stay, but he wanted to hit something. He hated the injustice of it all.

As the priestess watched the exchange between the chief and Natalia, her heart sank. The only possible solution required a phoenix feather, an extremely rare spell component—one which she just happened to have, she realized.

When she had packed for this journey, she had absent-mindedly placed the feather into her bag. Perhaps Najima, Goddess of the sun and healing, had guided her hand.

She rummaged through her bag, deciding to use the feather despite the displeasure it may bring to the other temple elders. The component was so rare that most temples could only dream of having one. Regardless, she must do whatever she could to help these people.

When she stood, she had what appeared to be a bright feather wreathed in flames in one hand; in her other, she held an incense burner. Orin watched her walk over to Natalia, who asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to try one more time,” the priestess said, placing the feather on the baby. Sprinkling a circle of salt around Natalia, she said, “This feather is of the Huma, a rare bird that symbolizes resurrection among my people. I believe your people call it a phoenix.”

After completing the circle, Samara sat in front of Natalia. “It is said that a Huma only appears in Sunat Kabisa, my home, once every four hundred years. I only have one feather. They’re very valuable to my people.”

Closing her eyes, she began to sing. Orin hung his cloak back on the curved wall and sat outside the circle. The song was beautiful and ghostly.

Suddenly, a gust picked up outside, howling through the camp. The priestess, who knelt in front of Natalia, fell back, catching herself with her hands and ending her song.

The candles in the yurt went out, and the power that she had been gathering dissipated instantly as a purple light enveloped her. Orin and Natalia stared at her uncertainly.

Samara could feel the light stealing her magic, even her lifeforce. As she fought against the anomaly, she could feel it weakening. After the struggle, the light left her and slowly seeped into the child.

She felt weak and drained, but she also sensed a presence in the room, ancient and powerful. "Abizou?" she whispered.

When the wind died down, a weak cry came out of the baby's mouth. Orin leaped up. "You did it!" He opened the flap to let in some dim light, then relit the candles.

With eyes as wide as Orin's, Samara swept her gaze from him to the now-breathing baby and back again. "I did no—" she began, then hesitated when she saw the grin spreading across his face. "I think the gods have blessed you, but not as I expected," she finished.

"And the spirits of our ancestors, as well," he replied distantly, distracted by his wife's beautiful glow. He would swear for the rest of his life that in addition to a warm smile on her lips and an unusual brightness to her eyes, an otherworldly glow surrounded her face as well.

Turning back around, he seized the priestess and lifted her into the air. "Thank you!" he shouted. Returning her once more to solid ground, he leaned over his wife, hugging her and his newborn child.

Samara, smiling, looked down on them. "You two are beautiful. May I see the baby? I want to make sure she's healthy."

Natalia stared down at her little girl, whose cry had started to grow louder, and reluctantly passed her over.

Still smiling, Samara said, "Alright, get a blanket, quick. We need to keep the baby warm."

Orin searched for a blanket. Failing to find one, he grabbed his cloak and passed it to her instead. The priestess wrapped it around the child. She could still feel the familiar presence inside the young girl, and it frightened her.

"What are you going to name her?" she asked, deciding not to alarm the girl's parents with her suspicions.

Orin and Natalia exchanged glances, and Natalia nodded to him. Orin knew that meant he could choose the name, as was tradition among the tribe.

Clearing his throat, he said, "I think I would like to name her in honor of the woman who saved her life." He reached down and picked up the long, red feather. "I want to name her Samara." Natalia nodded at him, approving of the name.

"I am honored, sir. Now I must attend to the child's health."

Orin kissed his wife, then stood up. While the priestess examined the baby, he said, "I'll tell Sigmia the good news. She'll be happy to hear that the child is a girl." He walked to the yurt's entrance.

“Please hurry back, my love,” Natalia said, before he stepped outside.

The cold air sent goosebumps over his uncovered body, and he wrapped his arms around his torso to keep himself warm. The shaman was nowhere in sight, but he could see her tracks clearly in the snow, trailing away from the normal traffic of the night. Following them, he found the old shaman near the horses, gazing out across the cold landscape.

As he neared, she said, “I heard the baby crying. I’m pleased for you.”

Stepping up next to her, Orin said, “It’s a girl. I’ve named her Samara.”

Raising an eyebrow, Sigmia said, “A Havallan name?” Dropping her head, she sighed. “Orin, I understand what you did and why you did it. No one will fault you for it.” She raised her eyes to meet his. “However, it was impulsive, reckless, and contrary to our traditions. I’m afraid I’m going to ask you to stand down as chief.”

He glowered at her a long while before responding. “I don’t understand. I was just trying to save the life of my wife and child.”

“I told you that I understand what you were doing.” Sigmia stared out across the plains again. “It’s one thing to bring outsiders into our camp, but to bring a shaman of the False Ways can anger the spirits. You could bring bad luck to our tribe.”

Glaring at Sigmia, Orin said, “You were unable to save her.”

Sigmia sighed, “Yes, I was unable to save her. I’m very pleased the outsider was able to.”

Turning to Orin, she said, "We shall hold a council . . . see what the tribe wants." Orin appeared ready to argue, but Sigmia cut him off. Putting her hand on his forearm, she said, "Get back to your wife and child. This should be a happy moment."

Gritting his teeth, Orin said, "You're . . ." Finishing with a growl, he turned to walk back to the yurt.

Before he had gone very far, Sigmia called out, "Orin!" He glanced back at her. "Do what you must to take care of her. I believe the spirits have blessed your child."

Silently nodding, he turned away, continuing his walk back to the yurt. As soon as his form disappeared behind a dwelling, Sigmia dropped to the ground, exhausted. Her magic, too, had been drained when little Samara was revived.

When Orin stepped back inside, he told Natalia, "Sigmia wants me to step down as chief."

"Good!" said Natalia.

"Good?" Orin asked. "What do you mean?"

His wife looked at Samara and nodded. The priestess said, "Your daughter is weak. I need you to come back to the Havallan outpost with me and stay at least two weeks—maybe longer."

"The tribe must keep moving. The mammoths will not wait," Orin said, standing straighter.

The priestess put her hands on her hips. "Your daughter is premature and will not survive unless she is cared for."

"Samara, you must understand," Natalia said. "The tribe will move on with or without us. If we stay, we won't be able to catch up to them, and they won't be back here

until next winter.” The child fed from her breast as she talked, the huge cloak wrapped around them both.

The priestess smiled. “Well . . . you three will just have to stay with me until then.”

## I

THE AWAKENING

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Little Samara wiped her smiling mouth, spreading juice and mud across the smooth, pale-brown skin of her cheek with her purple-stained hands. She popped another blackberry between her lips, and purple juice spilled onto her chin.

A tiny collection of berries formed a modest pile in the small woven basket her mother had given her for the harvest. She bent and plucked another handful of berries, transferring them into her basket.

She looked at her mother, who knelt close by, picking berries at a more practiced speed, her long, black hair hanging over her face and the thick fur hood of the parka that rested over her back. Samara stood.

All around her, she saw women crouched, laboring over the blackberries, gossiping about topics that interested her very little. After spending all her childhood on the Hunting Grounds, she very much enjoyed the view from her current height. The mountains were a wonderland to her, with their uneven terrain and diverse wildlife.

Her midnight-blue eyes shining, she gazed around at the more immediate pine trees that surrounded the berry-filled clearing, awed by these ancient monoliths that towered above the ground. Gazing farther out, she marveled at the coat of evergreens covering the mountains, spotted with the occasional dell.

Above the forests, the mountains' snow-covered peaks reached toward the cloudless sky. The sun felt warm and tingly against her exposed skin, despite the cold mountain air.

The southern half of the clearing still retained some winter snow, sparkling like tiny crystal clusters in the sunlight. At the western tip of the glade, a rocky, anvil-shaped outcropping jutted from the side of the mountain.

This was Samara's first foraging trip, and although this would be her ninth spring season, the adults still considered her too young for these long-distance harvests.

Her mother, Natalia, had allowed her to join this outing only because she was being trained to take the place of the tribe's shaman, Sigmia—a responsibility, they told her, that required considerable maturity, and was a great honor.

This foray into the mountains made Samara bounce with excitement. What Natalia didn't know was that she had begged the old shaman to let her go, and Sigmia, chuckling, had given in, under the condition that Samara gather some herbs from the mountains, a task she had accepted with glee.

The tribe mostly stayed in the Hunting Grounds, following a herd of mammoths in a great circle across the plains. During the summer months, the mammoths

trekked southeast along Mammoth River, and the tribe camped near the widest bank of the waterway.

By mid-autumn, the great beasts reached the western banks of Standing Lake, and her people assembled beside its frozen shores. By spring, the tribesmen raised camp near the mountains as the herd followed a northern trek across the foot of the highlands. Since she had taken her first steps, Samara had gazed at these mountains every spring, longing to step into them.

This spring, she could have stayed at camp and helped her father at the forge or played with the other children around her age. In fact, the tribe was preparing for a celebration. The chief's son, Nikolai, had killed his first mammoth, and the tribe planned to feast in his honor. The festivities back at camp would have been fun, but she had no intention of missing her first opportunity to go into the mountains.

She smiled to herself smugly, knowing she had made the right decision as she examined the rocky outcropping to the west. She wanted to climb to the top of the huge boulder to see the view from such a height. She could even collect more herbs for *Sigmia* along the way.

She yanked on her mother's sleeve, interrupting the chatter between Natalia and her aunt, Accalia. "Mom," she said. Natalia didn't acknowledge her, so she tried again. "Mom!" Receiving the same results, she tried a couple more times; after all, this was very important.

"Samara, you know better than to interrupt," Natalia snapped, annoyance clear in her voice. The girl had gained the unwanted attention of a few ladies now, some of them chuckling. "What do you want, Samara?"

"May I climb up there?" Samara mumbled quietly and pointed at the rock, blushing.

“What?” Natalia said.

“Umm.” Samara pointed to the outcropping again and lifted her herb pouch, hoping her mother could guess what she wanted.

“Speak, child!”

“Can I please climb up that rock? I’ll collect some herbs along the way.”

Natalia examined the outcropping. It stretched like a hood from the mountain, towering over them. Piles of boulders and scree collected underneath the hood, the result of erosion, but the western half sloped steeply, creating a V-shaped nook between the mountain’s slope and the side of the stone.

She didn’t feel comfortable letting her daughter climb the protrusion alone; she would be too far away to offer assistance if there were trouble. Natalia looked at Accalia, who shrugged. She glanced down at her daughter.

“Oh, Samara, you’re filthy,” Natalia said, smiling. She reached over and wiped a clump of mud off Samara’s cheek. Then she took her child’s berry basket and said, “Go ahead and go, but I want you to take Karena with you. Stay close to her, alright?”

“Yes!” Samara said, hopping on her toes, her raven-black hair swinging behind her. Karena, the next youngest of the group, having seen thirteen seasons, heard Natalia’s instructions and stood up from her labor. Samara could see that Karena was excited about getting out of work.

“Thank you, Mother,” Samara said and jumped into Natalia’s arms for a hug. She smiled eagerly, skipping off toward the huge rock.

“Karena,” Natalia said. “Keep a close eye on her, and be careful.”

“I will, Natalia,” the young girl replied, following her ward.

Samara headed directly for the rocky outcropping, with Karena in tow. Mushrooms popped up here and there. Plants grew sparsely underneath the trees, but she only picked the mushrooms and a few other herbs, quickly filling her bag.

Under the trees, the twisted roots and rocks that jutted from the ground offered hazardous footing. The few areas clear of roots squished under her leather shoes. She tried to stay on the rocks, roots, and piles of dead pine leaves to avoid the slippery mud. Karena followed close behind.

While the two of them traveled down the mountain’s slope to circle around the rock, the clearing was almost out of sight. Samara stopped, sharpened a stick with the knife her father had made her, and placed the spike into the ground so she could easily find her way back to the others. She had seen the adults do this on the way to the clearing and copied them so she wouldn’t get lost. Karena, chuckling, helped her shove the stick firmly into the ground.

Reaching the top of the rock appeared difficult, but after exploring the base of the boulder, they found that the northwest side had a gentle incline, with countless handholds. Samara scrambled up this, her leather boots sliding on the slippery moss.

Karena, laughing, said, “Wait for me. You’re like a mountain goat.” Then she bounded up the slant after her, reaching the top in half the time.

The crown of the rock gradually arched up to the edge over the clearing, flattening out around the ledge except for where a wide crack split the rock from north to south.

Samara watched Karena hop across the divide. She went to the edge of the fissure and studied it uneasily. The gap reached two yards across and dropped almost twice that distance into a tight wedge. Not seeing any other option, she took a few steps back to get a running start. When she tried to jump across, she lost her balance and went over the edge. Squealing, she glanced toward Karena in terror, just in time to see the older girl catch her wrist and pull her the rest of the way across, her feet dangling.

“Be careful, Samara,” Karena admonished her. She released the girl safely on the other side. “It’s beautiful up here!” she said.

Samara watched as the older girl stepped over to the very edge of the rock, her hair blowing wildly in the wind. She could only dream of attaining Karena’s beauty and charisma by the time she reached her fourteenth winter. Sadly, she could never share her cousin’s beautiful brown eyes.

Karena had another winter before her coming-of-age ceremony, and she and Nikolai were to be wed on that day. Samara couldn’t wait. She looked forward to the day full of festivities. Karena had promised her that she could officially wrap their hands, a job traditionally held by Sigmia.

She skipped over next to the older girl and took her hand. The Hunting Grounds spread out from the mountain as far as she could see, Mammoth River splitting the northern and southern halves of the plains.

The mountains spanned north and south like immense, jagged walls that halted the Hunting Grounds.

A falcon circled not far away, and she wondered what it must be like to see the world through the eyes of such a bird. From where she stood, the camp below resembled tiny toys, and the people, like ants crawling among them.

“It’s beautiful,” repeated Karena, admiring the view.

“Yes,” Samara agreed, smiling up at her.

“I’m glad you came with us, Samara. If you’d stayed at camp, I would’ve been stuck picking berries all day.” The older girl made an exaggerated face of disgust, sending Samara into a giggling fit.

Gusts eddied over the rock, and Samara’s jet-black hair whipped sporadically behind her in the relatively calm breeze. Natalia waved up at them, shouting to be careful, and Samara waved back. The southern tip of the rock contained a shallow cavity they could climb into while still facing the clearing. The girls stepped in and sat down. Samara took a deep breath, savoring the mountain air, then pulled out the herbs she had collected along the way and started organizing them.

Karena watched her for a while, then began asking about each one. She pointed to a twisted pile of flat roots and asked, “What’s that mess?”

“That’s arctic root,” Samara explained, relishing the opportunity to show off her knowledge. “It’s used to improve our endurance in different climates. Sigmia uses it to make her golden tea.”

The older girl tried to pay attention, but as Samara slipped into a more detailed explanation, she lost interest and inquired about a different one. “What about that?” she asked, pointing at a long, fat, blue-green leaf.

The interruption didn't deter Samara, who said, "That's northern aloe!" She excitedly explained how to create a salve for burns.

After several minutes of the girl's tutelage, Karena yawned. "Alright, Samara," she interrupted again. "Do you mind if I take a nap? This sun's making me sleepy."

"Nah, go ahead," Samara said. "I'm going to grind some mushrooms for Sigmia for a while." Pulling a small ivory mortar and pestle from her pouch, she tossed in some mushrooms and smashed them into a paste. She hummed and gazed into the distance as she worked.

Karena lay down and closed her eyes. "Stay close to me," she said. "And wake me up if you need to."

Samara glanced at her, her mouth twisted into a grin. "I'm going to sneak off while you're asleep," she said.

"You'd better not," Karena said, sitting up. Samara's dark blue eyes glittered mischievously, and Karena smiled, rolling her eyes, then lay back down. "You're silly."

It didn't take long for Samara to completely fill a little hide drawstring bag with the mushroom paste. She looked down at the clearing, where the adults still labored over the blackberries. She gathered her things back into her leather pouch, with the exception of the arctic root.

Karena slept, and Samara took out her knife. It was made for harvesting, and her father had etched the runes, "My love and life," on the top flat edge of the blade. It was her most prized possession, and she carried it everywhere. Her father had once told her that the Havallan people called it a kukri.

She remembered helping her dad make it. He had allowed her to help hammer the heated metal into its

curved shape. She knew she hadn't really done anything and that her father had actually done all the hammering, but that didn't matter, because she had been allowed to be involved.

Palming the back side of the blade, she started cutting the arctic root into more manageable chunks. Eventually, she became restless sitting on the rock. Not wanting to wake Karena, she put the knife away, and quietly moved out of the cavity to admire more of the scenery.

Stepping over to the edge of the rock, she looked toward Havalla, the home of the southern invaders. Their territory was marked by thick forests that lined the border of the Hunting Grounds. From this vantage, it looked like a green sea.

As she contemplated the southern lands, fear suddenly washed over her, along with the sensation that something was wrong—something in the clearing. The back of her neck tingled, and her breath came out in short, nervous bursts. She rushed over to gain a better view of the blackberry field.

The adults were casually packing berries and baskets into backpacks, preparing to leave, laughing and chattering away. She still heard birds singing and leaping in the branches, the sky was still clear and sunny; everything seemed fine. Something nagged at her, regardless.

Then something stirred at the edge of the clearing. It was as if a bush had slowly shifted. Something about it seemed . . . odd. She squinted. After studying the plants carefully, she was able to make out a person with plants tied to them sneaking into the clearing—not a bush at all.

After spotting the first one, she was able to pick out more. They were all around the clearing. "Look out!" she

screamed as loud as she could, and the gatherers below glanced up to her. Then, chaos broke out in the field.

She couldn't see anything at first. Then a net, woven like a spiderweb, appeared above one of the adults and fell on top of her, and she began screaming. Another net flashed into existence, capturing someone else. Samara's mouth gaped open as the adults crashed to the ground, folded into nets. She watched as a golden web hit her mother and folded around her.

"Mommy!" she screamed. "Mommy, no! Mom!" Karena started and sat up. She saw Samara at the very edge of the rock, her hand outstretched and tears flowing down her face. "They're taking Mommy," Samara said.

Karena rushed over to the ledge and looked down at the clearing, at the capture taking place. "Mom!" shouted Samara. One of the interlopers gazed up at the rock. Karena pulled Samara away from the edge, clamping her hand around the girl's mouth.

"Quiet, they'll find us," Karena whimpered through tears.