

HEARTH KEEPER

A STORY OF THE SPIRALCHAIN

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Onus

They had not been on the road more than a few hours, but already Moulus' bones ached. He had never been a very capable traveler, and keeping to the pace set by his exuberant granddaughter was more than the old scribe could bear.

"Hold, Jara, please—I need to rest." Moulus eyed an appealing stone near the road and shambled in its general direction. Beyond the large stone, blotting out all that he could see in the western direction in which they traveled, were the rugged Borrik Mountains.

Jara, every bit a reflection of her mother, sighed and joined him as he sat on the flat surface of the sitting stone. "We will not find her sitting down, grandfather. My vision is pulling us towards mother, but the journey is long."

"And that's why we must rest when we can, dear," Moulus smiled. "And I warn you—try not to cleave too tightly to those visions. Destiny makes a better sign post than it does road."

Jara stared blankly at her grandfather, and he could not help but laugh.

"What?" she asked. "What's funny?"

"I have seen that look before. In the mirror, even." Moulus sighed. "The words are true ones, even if they don't always make the most sense."

"Destiny is a road, though. I see it stretching out before me, and I see it winding towards mother. Far from here." Jara gestured towards the path that led them towards the mountains. "See? Literally, a road."

"But if you let destiny be your road, you are living only for your end. Every step is by design, every encounter accumulating to the final purpose. That is a life as a piece of a machine, Jara, not as a person. Your grandmother believed much as you do—perhaps all of you touched by Wyr magic are believers in the road. But I learned, long before the wrinkles and the white hair, that to live life, we have to cross the countryside and explore the uncertain places. Sign posts will point us in the right direction, but living is what happens between the posts."

Jara said nothing.

“If we still end up at the place we need to be, where the Purpose demands we belong, what difference does it make how we get there?” Moultus asked. “My route to this place, today, was hardly direct. But the woman who taught me this sign post philosophy – her route was even more circuitous.”

“Grandmother?” Jara asked, her eyes bright. Moultus loved how eager Jara always was to learn more of his beloved Callie.

“No, my dear. While I learned many things from your grandmother, in this instance my teacher was a very different woman indeed. A woman named Marriq, from a very distant world called...

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ARCTOS

“You lie!” She spat the words in the dirty snow at his feet. All around them, in the haze of the mid-day afternoon, the other children were gathered in a circle. There were perhaps a dozen of them, plus Marriq and Gorren in the center. There were no classes today, and thus no supervision. Mothers and fathers and older siblings alike were all toiling in tunnels and mines and craft shops, leaving the children to their own devices.

“It’s not a lie,” Gorren sneered. “My sister told me it was so. Girls can’t be no teachers.”

Marriq narrowed her eyes. Gorren was an ugly little boy, inside and out, but she didn’t know him to be a liar. They’d known each other their whole lives, and even though he was cruel and selfish, she had thought that perhaps it would be safe to tell him of her secret dream. She wanted to tell someone. She needed to. Secrets ate at her, chewed at her heart, and she hated that feeling. But now he had stretched her secret out in the cold light for everyone to see, for everyone to laugh at – and she could hear them laughing. Gorren stood before her, but all the others were chittering and chuckling, laughing and pointing.

Anger boiled in her veins, and Marriq turned to the children, some younger, some older, but none much beyond her own thirteen years – any older and they would be done with school, ready to work or to build families. She looked at them all and she shouted, “What are you laughing at?”

“A stupid girl,” Gorren grunted, “who doesn’t even know how good she’s got it.”

Those were the last words Marriq heard. The little runt continued to speak, sound stumbling from between his crooked, dirty teeth, but she didn’t listen. Rage filled her ears with a roaring sound as she balled her tiny fists and took three steady steps right up into Gorren’s face. Whatever he was saying at that point ceased to matter as she slugged him in the nose.

Blood ran freely, steaming in the chill air, and Marriq knew she had done wrong. Blood was precious—it was life and fortune and opportunity and more, and she was wasting it needlessly. Regret bubbled in her, and she moved to try to help Gorren, to staunch the flow with the scarf wound round her neck. He pushed her back angrily, shouting for his mother, and Marriq lost her own balance, falling back and twisting to land on her hands. Her bare palms scraped across the snow and the pebbles beneath it, and that was when everything became very complicated.

Her palms, torn open by the tiny rocks, bled. But unlike Gorren, unlike everyone Marriq had ever met, her blood did not steam in the air. Her blood fizzled. It sputtered and splattered and where the tiny droplets touched the dirty snow, the snow melted and sparked. Where her blood landed, it burned. It made light and it made smoke and, more important than anything else, it made heat.

The children all ran screaming—Gorren fastest and loudest of all. For quite some time, Marriq sat there in the snow, alone. She held her hands, barely injured, in her laps, staring at them as waves of warmth wrapped around her and the snow nearest her faded to water that was gobbled up quickly by newly-thawed ground.

“What am I?” she asked quietly to no one in particular.

“A surprise,” whispered a deep voice she had not heard before.

Marriq looked up, and around, and at first she saw nothing. No adults of the village had come—the few that did not work in the mines were too busy to attend to the ravings of their children, after all—and she was, as far as she could tell, still alone. But Marriq had never before heard voices, so she doubted that she was suddenly mad. Of course she had never before started a fire with her blood, so perhaps today was indeed a day of firsts.

“We are coming for you,” the voice whispered resonantly from a place Marriq could not see.

The words were not comforting. The tone, the mystery of it—it left her feeling cold, in spite of the heat of her bizarre predicament.

Then Elder Cambus emerged from his hut. He was bundled tightly, only his eyes and a bit of his forehead exposed to the air beneath the great fur jacket he always wore, but he headed straight for Marriq. The old man, the last teacher in Levla and the only teacher Marriq had ever known, knelt down beside her and said, “It will be well, little one. Let me get you inside.”

He took her hands in his own gloved hands carefully, avoiding the touch of her skinned palms even though tiny scabs were already forming over the haphazard tears in her skin. She stood and followed the kindly old man into his hut, unaware how everything in her world had changed.

Marrig ran the bone comb through her long, dark hair. The dressing room where Vanuella had abandoned her to prepare for the ceremony was well-lit by globe lamps, and the polished metal mirror before her reflected the red light brilliantly. Her skin, a richer copper color than even her mother's had been, was flawless in this light, even though she knew of a dozen imperfections that grated on her nerves. Today was about presentation, and she wanted everything to be perfect.

Life had turned out differently than Marrig had ever imagined. Instead of a wife and mother—the highest station any young woman of a mining village in the White Bound could expect to attain—she stood now in the lodge house of the Circle of Stone, the sacred order of Hearth Keepers that protected all of Arctos from the endless winter. As pretentious as that sounded, it was true—and today she would join their numbers officially.

After four years of training and practice, first using the rudimentary knowledge her school teacher had been able to remember from books and scrolls he had studied in his own youth at the Archive and then, more recently, at the hands of traveling lodge members when at last they had heard of her existence huddled away in Elder Cambus' hut, Marrig was ready to make something of herself. She was not to be a teacher or a scholar—that particular dream had been the first of many things to go up in smoke upon the discovery that she had in her veins the Winterblood—but she was, at least, afforded the chance to be something magnificent.

"You look fine," Vanuella said, smiling. The girl was thirteen—the same age Marrig had been when the blood first woke—but her parents were both members of the lodge. Unlike Marrig, who had learned everything about the Circle of Stone second-hand, the sacraments and mission of the Hearth Keepers was as natural to Vanuella as breathing.

"I feel awful. I—I am not ready." She drew in several steadying breaths and paced over to the globe lamp. It was spherical, about the size of a man's head. The glass ball was thick, and the blood within bubbled as it glowed. The minerals that gave it its luminous properties, suspended in the thick liquid, sparkled in a way she had always found beautiful. "Do you know what it's like, out in the Bound?"

Vanuella shook her head. "I've never been. It sounds wonderful though. To be out surrounded by nature, far from the press of the people."

"It's colder there. There are not enough people to power the furnaces like we have here in the inner cities. People are miserable. But it was my home, and I miss it." Marrig touched the necklace she wore around her neck—a simple blue stone bored through with a tiny hole and strung upon a cord of braided leather—and looked herself over one last time in the mirror. Her black robe was not flattering on her small, squarish frame, but it did not matter. She was as beautiful as she would ever be.

"You will get to go back now," Vanuella said reassuringly. "And now you will be able to help them."

“I know,” Marriq said softly. “But I fear they will have no part of the help I can provide.”

Without any other words, the two made the last preparations. Vanuella, having aided others in the ceremony before, moved with sure, steady hands as she applied a small, sharp needle to Marriq’s palm, stippling a circular pattern in the flesh that brought tiny beads of blood to the surface.

Marriq stared at the beads, nine in all, and held the blood steady with her gaze. It did not burn, or flow, or scab—it sat there, glistening, gleaming, and perfect.

Vanuella pushed the heavy door of the dressing chamber open, and Marriq stepped through it, down the low, dark hallway towards the echo chamber where she would accept what she was and, perhaps, find peace in it.

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It was her twenty-seventh birthday. The number was not of any particular significance, but as the day dawned, cloudy and windy but blissfully unmarred by new snowfall, Marriq imagined that it was a day of grand possibilities.

She was not far from where she had grown up, in the far southern arm of the White Bound. Her destination was a village was called Shezra. She had been summoned here by the village elders to help them repair their hearth—the closest that a village of such small size could come to a great furnace. At least that had been what Vanuella had told her in the dispatch, carried by sparrow-hawk out into the Bound.

Marriq had slept in the hills, under a small tent and wrapped in the warmth of a blood circle. The journey from Kemusa had been boring, as all journeys were for Hearth Keepers, and she enjoyed the sight of the stars on a clear night, far from the belching smoke of the city furnaces.

There was no road, of course—why would there be? The distance between villages was too great out here, and without the sheltering warmth of a hearth or a furnace, no man, woman, or child could survive the limitless cold of the nights on Arctos. So there was no travel from place to place, except by the lodge members and the occasional member of the Order of Gar, visiting from far-off Onus. The unique properties of Marriq’s blood made her able to create heat in a world where nothing burned, and thus the key to traveling the endless snow-covered lands of Arctos was hers.

And where had it taken her in the past ten years? Many places. She had helped establish new villages by building first hearths in places where daring miners had struck new veins of minerals and metals, and she had repaired the faltering hearths of villages whose first establishment had been so long ago that even the magic in the Winterblood that boiled at the center of a hearthstone was fading. She had seen the workings of the mighty furnaces that protected the great cities and she had even, just

once, from the top of a glacial ridge, seen the lights of the Archive—a place she had once longed to study and toil, but now was forever barred from entering. For a girl whose blood was flame, a journey into a building filled with parchment was never to be.

In recent months, Marriq had spent most of her time ferrying people from village to village. Others among the lodge were better at crafting hearths or mending furnaces—Marriq loved people. She loved their stories and their lies, their secrets and their dreams. She tried, as often as she could, to help people travel from village to village, or from city to village, or even more rarely, from village to city. She surrounded them with a circle of warmth, with torches tipped with a smear of her precious, mysterious blood, and off they went—conquering the isolation that threatened to drive what passed for their civilization to ruin.

There were not enough Hearth Keepers. The Winterblood that made them what they were was centuries old, a bloodline grown thin and watery by dilution and too far gone to be reliably restored by selective mating. The lodge today numbered only thirty members—barely one for every city. The villages were largely left to rot, but that did not sit well with Marriq. So here she was, entering Shezra to do what no one else could or would do.

As she entered the village with the first light of the rising sun, she was taken aback at the squalor. She knew that most villages were poor, but Shezra was worse off than most. Worse, she feared that with that poverty would come superstition—the same superstition that had left her disowned by her own parents. Some of the village folk insisted that Winterblood was a curse left by the old gods, before they retreated to the summer lands. These same superstitious bumpkins had no compunction against accepting the help of the Circle of Stone when it came time to repair their hearth, but aside from that necessary work, they wanted nothing to do with Hearth Keepers.

But that was not the reception Marriq received here.

A woman, an Elder if the heavy metal amulet around her neck was an indication of anything, came rushing up to her, her feet slipping in the patchy snow and ice at the outskirts of the village. The ice made it easy to tell where the heat of the hearth ended—a clear boundary of where the winter night could and could not reach.

“You are Marriq?” the woman asked, her eyes pleading.

“Yes,” Marriq said cautiously.

“He said you would come, but I did not believe,” the woman said. “Come, please. Quickly. I am Pama.”

Taking Marriq roughly by the hand, the old woman, pale skinned and with just a hint of thin gray hair showing beneath the hood of her coat, led her to a small dome-like building in the center of the village. Surely this was where the hearth was kept.

Inside was an eclectic pair of people – neither of whom belonged here.

Marrig inclined her head suspiciously at the only man in the room – a middle-aged man with white skin wearing heavy gray robes. She had met him twice before, and never much cared for him or the meddling for which he was famed in some circles.

“Corudain,” she said cautiously. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The man smiled widely. “Simply trying to help. I am so happy Vanuella was able to get word to you.”

The affection that Vanuella had always shown for this monk was one of her more irritating character traits, and Marrig was certain she would need an opportunity to address that someday soon. Corudain was one of the Gatemakers that came and went from Arctos as they pleased, often at the behest of the Archivists, and in some ways Marrig was certain she disliked him because of the ease with which he traveled. Distance was no obstacle to a Gatekeeper, and thus people like Corudain made the vital role of the Hearth Keepers somewhat less essential. That was a selfish reason to dislike the man, but Marrig was entitled to a degree of selfishness. She was the one marked an outcast by her blood, after all. Why shouldn’t she relish in the one piece of her burden that made her even remotely acceptable by the people of her world?

“She said the village had need of a Hearth Keeper. She said nothing of you,” Marrig replied tensely.

“Well,” Corudain smiled again, “I sort of asked her not to.”

“Please,” the old woman said, bringing Marrig’s attention back to what really mattered, “please help.”

Marrig looked at the other resident of the building – a young woman about her age with bright yellow hair and a tall, full figure wearing a simple black tunic, lined with fur, and black breeches. Like Corudain, this woman did not belong here, but she was clearly not a Gar – there were no women Gars.

“What is the trouble?” Marrig asked.

“My son,” the old woman said, barely holding back a sob. “He is missing.”

Marrig felt her stomach twist into knots. Missing meant only one thing on the Bound – dead.

“I’m so sorry, Elder,” Marrig said softly. “There is nothing we can do. If he left the radius of the hearth, he died on the first night.”

Corudain shook his head. “That was what I thought as well! I have not spent nearly as much time here on Arctos as many of my brothers, but we are all familiar with the unique climate of your world. But Elder Pama spoke so passionately about her son that I decided to get involved myself.”

“Of course you did,” Marrig muttered quietly.

“I immediately returned to Onus and sought a member of the Qiy to voyage back here with me.” Corudain gestured towards the yellow-haired woman. “Whisper, tell the Hearth Keeper what you told me.”

The woman spoke hesitantly at first, as though she was unaccustomed to speaking. Her voice was bubbly once unleashed, and her bright eyes were vividly animated. “Those of my order are called Wraithtenders, back home. We speak to the fallen and ease their suffering whenever we can. It is not always a pleasant burden, as you can probably imagine, but sometimes we get to share good news with people. When Corudain and I arrived, I was able to give this kind old woman the news she was hoping for.”

“And that news would be?” Marriq asked with a sigh.

“That her son, Ebram, yet lives. His voice is not heard in the Far Halls. Isn’t that exciting?” Whisper’s voice was anything but a whisper.

“That isn’t possible,” Marriq shook her head. “I’ve been traveling for four days to reach you. No one can survive in the Bound for four days.”

“Unless they are touched by the Winterblood,” Elder Pama said reverently. “It is the only explanation. My son must have been born with the blood of a Hearth Keeper. This is why you must save him! Is it not your first duty to the Circle of Stone?”

“That’s... possible, I suppose,” Marriq said. She considered the options, and, if Corudain and this Whisper woman were being honest, that was the only possibility that made any sense. It was her duty to bring new members into the lodge, of course, and she knew how terrifying and alone the Bound was for a young child.

“I’ll go. I’ll try to find Ebram and bring him home to you.” Marriq turned to leave the small building. As she did so, a soft hand caught hers.

“I’d like to go with you, if that’s allowed?” Whisper asked quietly. “This is my first time visiting another world.”

“I don’t have time for sight-seeing. The Bound is dangerous—you’ll freeze to death when the sun sets.” Marriq dislodged Whisper’s hand and stepped out of the building. As much as she disliked the general distance that the people of the Bound kept from Hearth Keepers, she had grown accustomed to the solitude. She was not in the mood for a traveling companion.

The first day of searching was nearing its end. Marriq held a torch up high over her head, the tip smeared with her blood and burning bright. The light of the torch spread far and wide across the gleaming ice-crusting hills of snow, but nowhere did she see signs of life. If Ebram had come this way, he left no tracks. He was a small boy, as his mother described him, so perhaps he was not of sufficient weight to crack the crust of the snow, but even small footsteps would have left traces, especially if he were Winterblooded. To survive the nights he would have to bleed, and the disruption that the release of such power had upon the snowscape was noticeable, even to one not as intimately familiar with the phenomenon as Marriq.

She prepared to unsling her pack and erect her meager tent in a small hollow between two hills as the pale light of the sun sank below the horizon. When she was younger, the sun had fascinated her. She had so many questions back then—so many things about which she longed to learn. She sighed and pushed such notions out of her head—there was a job at hand, and it was not a job that would get done if she did not weather the night.

She could taste the snow in the air. Not a blizzard, thankfully, but a heavy snowfall would be upon her soon. She set the two posts of the tent and stretched the treated hide across them as she had done a hundred times or more, pushing the rest of her pack into the narrow space inside the tent and turning back to walk off a small perimeter around the campsite. As she walked, careful to avoid creating a circle too wide, she pricked a finger with the sharp spindle of the ring she wore on her left hand. She sprinkled droplets of blood in the circle she had walked, and the magic of the blood did its work. A curtain of heat rose up from the trampled snow, bending in to form a dome of gentle warmth that would endure for hours—well past the life-ending cold that would fall now that the sun was set.

She slid into the tent, feet first, and pulled her pack, crumpled into a ball that would make a serviceable pillow, under her chin. She lay there, looking out at the night sky as the snow clouds rolled in, and wondered many things. Of course she wondered if Ebram was safe and if tomorrow would be the day she found him, but there was more. She wondered about her mother and father, who she had not seen in so very long. She wondered about the village of Levla, and if it had survived the years since her departure. Many villages did not last that long.

As her thoughts wandered and sleep crept upon her, she heard a howling wind rise up around her tent. It roared and cooed and whispered, and in that wind were sounds Marriq had never heard before. The winter wind was as known to her as her own name—what was this?

Cautiously but not without a thrilling sense of wonder, she slipped out of the tent and slung her fur coat over her shoulders. She drew a thin line across her palm with her spindle ring and rubbed her palms together, spreading hot blood over both hands as it began to spark and sputter.

Carefully she left the circle of warmth and felt the deadly chill of the night fall upon her. She willed the blood on her palms to vibrant life, causing both hands to burst into flame. The fire did not burn her, but it cast light and heat in equal measure, and so burning she climbed the hill to the west of her camp.

The strange sounds upon the wind grew louder as she stumbled up the hill, and she felt her curiosity flicker as her fear grew. Very few things could live in the untempered night of the White Bound; a handful of wild animals with specialized hides were all that came to mind. None of those creatures made such sounds.

As she crested the hill, everything began to make sense. Lying atop the hill, her black cloak fluttering in the icy wind and the gently falling snow piling up all around her, was Whisper. Her pale skin was tinted blue and her breath no longer formed mist in the cold air.

Marrig dashed forward, churning up snow, and fell to her knees next to Whisper. She held her burning hands close by Whisper's face and body, imparting as much warmth as she could. The woman lived, but only just—a few more minutes and the night would have taken her completely. Marrig didn't have the strength to carry Whisper back to the tent, so she had to improvise.

There was a limit to how much blood the body could spare at any one time—that limit applied to Hearth Keepers as readily as it did to everyone else. There was a chance that if she let enough blood to draw another circle there would not be enough left in her to survive. There didn't seem to be any other choice.

Marrig gouged her finger into the barely-sealed cut on her palm and spread the tiny droplets of blood that tumbled out, already aflame, into the snow immediately surrounding Whisper. The circle was imprecise and uneven, but the heat of the blood did what it was meant to do, and the two of them huddled there, quietly, as the night crawled by. Snow fell all around them, but never on them, and in time, they both slept.

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"I found someone who knew something about Ebram's whereabouts, but by the time I went to tell you, you were already gone," Whisper explained as she watched Marrig strike the tent at the bottom of the hill the next morning.

"That's because that little boy, even if he is Winterblooded, can't survive out here forever. He needs food, and the longer we sit around investigating, the closer he gets to starving to death." Marrig stuffed the folded tent hide into her pack and ran the two posts through the straps on the side, slinging the whole pack back onto her back.

"Well then let's go," Whisper said with a smile. The color had come back to her skin and the bounce back to her step, which somehow managed to slightly offend Marrig. But with her enthusiasm came confidence, and as the blonde woman set off towards the west, towards the rising slopes of the Glacier Mountains, Marrig could not help but follow.

“So what did you find out that was worth risking your life for?” Marriq asked as they trudged along.

“I found someone in the Far Halls that knew where he was.” Whisper pointed towards the mountains. “There is a cave there where my friend thinks Ebram might have taken shelter.”

“The Far Halls?” Marriq asked. “Isn’t that what you call death?”

“Death is an ugly word. When we stop living in one place, we start living in another. That other place we call the Far Halls. It is a fascinating place. But yes, most people who don’t know any better call it death.” Whisper sighed. “I hate that word.”

“So a ghost told you where to find this little boy? And you don’t think that’s strange?” Marriq shook her head in disbelief. She had heard of all sorts of stories told of the mystics from Onus that traveled through the Spiralgates, but never had she heard of these so-called Wraithtenders. It seemed too much to accept.

Whisper said plainly, “No. Ghosts are all around us. They talk to all of us.”

“They don’t talk to me,” Marriq said curtly.

“They did last night.” Whisper smiled. “I sent three of them to find you when I fell. They brought you to me.”

Marriq drew up short. The strange sounds on the wind had been ghosts? Spirits?

“You don’t have to believe me,” Whisper said. “But this one fellow I have been speaking to is very insistent that you need to get to Ebram before the next nightfall, so we should really be walking faster.”

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The sun was perhaps an hour from setting as they came upon the entrance to the cavern that Whisper had insisted existed. It stood before them, shadowy and ominous and quite real, and it gave Marriq one less reason to doubt the claims of her traveling companion.

“I’ll go in alone,” Marriq said, holding out one hand to stop Whisper. “You stand watch out here. Take this,” she handed her blood-smearred torch to Whisper, “And do not let it go out.”

Whisper nodded silently and turned her back to the cave, facing out at the endless expanse of snow that stretched all around them.

Marriq entered the cave as quietly as she could, shrugging out of her pack and leaving it sitting near the entrance. She pulled from it a small globe lamp, a ball of glass only two inches across and

filled with ordinary blood and the flicker flash minerals that made it glow. She needed to save her own blood for times of necessity. What she required right now was merely light. The cave itself was almost warm – certainly warmer than the air outside.

The globe lamp cast its gentle light ahead as she crept silently across the smooth stone floor of the cave. It carved back into the mountain, a steadily declining tunnel that wound in a gentle curve towards the right. She could hear soft sounds within, but she could not tell what they were.

After ten minutes of creeping along, the tunnel finally opened into a chamber, a chamber well lit by bright white light. The room was a natural formation, with crooked and uneven walls and a ceiling easily thirty feet high. Light entered through veins of crystal in the stone, lighting the chamber with radiance that did not appear to change or fade as the sun outside set.

Ebram was lying on the floor of the chamber, alive but unconscious. She could see the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Hunched over him was something she had never seen before.

The creature was ten feet tall, at least, and squatted on its haunches over Ebram protectively. It had dirty white fur that hung long and tangled from all of its flesh, and its head was nearly twice as large proportion would indicate. It was roughly man-shaped, but its feet and hands ended in long, vicious claws, and it had only one eye, in the center of its shaggy forehead. The creature's lower jaw was very large, jutting forward to accommodate dozens of huge teeth that climbed up over its smaller upper lip.

"I can smell you," it grunted.

It could speak. Marriq didn't know what to do. She could burn it – she could bring her blood to a near boil and cast a fistful of it at the creature. Its hide would provide protection, for sure, but she could take it down. But did she need to? It appeared to be protecting Ebram. If it could speak, could it also be reasoned with?

"Hello," she said cautiously, stepping out of the tunnel and into the light. "My name is –"

"I know your name, Marriq of Levla," the creature said, snorting.

"How is that possible?" she asked, genuinely intrigued.

The creature moved, slowly, away from Ebram, rising to its full height as it approached Marriq. "I can smell all of you, when it stirs in you. I came for you, but I was too late. That human took you in." It threw its head back and roared up at the gleaming ceiling. "We cannot take from humans. This is the law."

Marriq watched the creature carefully, but she also listened. Its voice, resonant and guttural, was not unknown to her. She had heard it before, somewhere. Long ago.

"You were at the village! When I fought Gorren!" Marriq exclaimed. "I heard you!"

The creature grinned. "I almost got there first. I would have spared you much suffering."

Marriq asked carefully, "What does that mean?"

"Humans treat strange things very badly." The creature settled back down on its haunches. "I am Borrigak. I found the boy and he is mine. You should leave now."

"No – what did you mean you could have spared me much suffering?"

Borrigak shook its great head. "Too late. You are important now. I will not take that from you. Your suffering has already happened. But his I may yet stop."

"How?" Marriq looked again at Ebram, sleeping peacefully. He was young – only six years old. His skin was dark and his hair shaggy and long. He was Winterblooded – she could feel it in him, this close. He would be driven out of his village when that became known, even though, unlike her own parents, his mother did not seem to see that as a curse.

The creature shuffled back towards Ebram. "I take the Hindra from his veins and leave the Human. His life is his own and mine can draw to its end."

"No!" came a shout from up the tunnel.

Marriq turned to see Whisper rushing forward, the torch sputtering in her hand. "You can't do that!" she exclaimed. She looked at Marriq, her bright eyes grim and determined, and said, "Ebram has a destiny. A Purpose. This is why Corudain worked so hard to get you here, to get me here. On my world there are people who see the future, and they know that Ebram, the Hearth Keeper, will be very important to us all one day."

"I will not be denied!" Borrigak roared, rising up again and taking a mighty step towards Whisper. "I want to die!"

"Then we can oblige you," Whisper said grimly. She lifted one hand up and squeezed it into a fist. All around them, Marriq she saw ghostly images flicker into view – translucent blue figures that appeared where before there had been empty air. They were dressed in furs and pelts, tall and stocky, with dark skin and veins that flickered between the ghostly blue and a radiant red color. Nearly a dozen of the phantom figures arrayed around Borrigak, and the great beast lashed out at them, its mighty talons carving through their ephemeral shapes to no effect.

Whisper ran to Marriq and took her by the hand. "They can't really hurt him – I don't trust what any of them would do if I materialized them. We need to get Ebram and run."

"What are they?" Marriq asked. "They look familiar."

"They are called the Hindra. They're very old – they've lived in the Far Halls for a very long time. Some of them were killed by this creature, that's why they told me where to find Ebram. They want to prolong its suffering."

The two knelt beside Ebram and lifted him up, Whisper taking the bulk of his weight, and while they did so, Marriq listened to the rage and the sorrow in Borrigak's roars. She watched the specters taunt him, and she thought of all he had said. Wheels turned in her mind.

The Hindras were her ancestors, the original carriers of the Winterblood – that much was obvious just by looking at them. But even among the Circle of Stone she had never heard that name before. This creature was of a kind unknown to her, to anyone. The capabilities of the mystics of Onus were mysteries. The dead lived in a special kingdom called the Far Halls. There was so much to learn, so many secrets and mysteries left in the world – in all worlds.

"Take him to the surface. I will meet you there." Marriq shifted the rest of Ebram's weight to Whisper and smiled at her. "I will make this right. Send the ghosts away."

Whisper, her eyes wide, nodded reluctantly. She carried Ebram awkwardly and, with a gesture of dismissal, scattered the spectral warriors back to the Far Halls.

Still enraged, Borrigak spun around to see Marriq standing there, alone. "Where is the boy?"

"You cannot have him," she said softly. "But you can have me."

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Nine years of apprenticeship flew by. Never had one undertaken the apprenticeship after their thirtieth year, but Marriq was no stranger to doing things that had not been done before. She learned the letters and the bindings, the memorizations and the catalogings, and she endured test after test.

Her apprenticeship might have been shorter had it not been for the fear among the Archivists that her Winterblood would return. Never before had there been a case of a Hearth Keeper whose inner fire had gone out, and yet hers had – under circumstances she refused to divulge to anyone. Without that fire, they could not deny her the chance to apprentice on any basis but her gender. Her social standing as a Hearth Keeper, even one bereft of power, made it politically difficult to turn her away solely because she was a woman. With all barriers to her application thus removed, it had been upon her to impress them all.

Her route to this place had been wide and strange, and many times she had thought it impossible to reach, but she stood now before the Archive as she had always dreamed she would. Destiny was a destination, but her journey had been fraught with wonder. When she looked back on the first thirty-five years of her life, she saw sign posts that pointed her to each of the most important events she had endured and survived and accomplished, but not a road. There was no road telling her how to get from post to post, and it was traveling those unnamed trails that had made it possible for her to learn all that she already had.

There was so much to learn in all the worlds, and only an Archivist, a keeper of the Archive, could ever learn it all. She missed the power that had once burned in her veins, but she longed, even more, for the secrets bound in ink and parchment in the glass halls of the Archive. Today, she would be sworn in as an Archivist, for once and for always.

This was power of a different sort, and it was warmth enough for her.