



GUARDIANS OF DAWN:

YULI

S. JAE-JONES



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
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THE WAKING DREAMERS



PRINCESS YULANA HAD A PROBLEM.

Well, it was more like seven smaller issues combined into one much larger one, which was the matter of coordinating a rescue effort with the Bangtan Brothers.

And the problem was too much visibility.

From her vantage point on the edge of the town square, Yuli looked with amazement and dismay at the screaming hordes of people that chanted the members' names as the boys passed through the streets of Urghud. Just the week prior, a somber hush—along with the chill of winter—had settled over the northern capital in the days following the Warlord's funeral. White banners were still draped over the canopies of every storefront, flapping like ghosts in the ever-present wind, but a festive atmosphere had descended over the city ever since the Bangtan Brothers docked in Urghud's harbor.

It was going to make this rescue operation that much more difficult.

"By the Great Bear." Yuli scowled, observing a handful of youths fawning over the eldest, Bohyun, on the edge of the crowd. "They're just a bunch of *boys*."

Good-looking boys, she had to admit, even if their looks did nothing for her. Of them all, it was sly-eyed Taeri who was her favorite, because his slinking grace brought to mind the dancers of Zanhei's pleasure district. Although it was Sungho who played the feminine roles in their plays, Taeri reminded Yuli of the courtesan-poetess Huang Jiyi with his heavy-lidded eyes and pouty lips.

"They haven't been in Urghud in two years," said Uncle Mongke

beside her. "Why should the rest of the Morning Realms enjoy their talents while the north languishes unloved and forgotten?"

Yuli rolled her eyes. Several players and performers traveled through the northern capital on a regular basis throughout the year, although none had been quite so eagerly anticipated as the Bangtan Brothers. In the weeks leading up to their presence in the city, paper posters with their likenesses had been plastered on wooden walls all over the marketplace. They had always been popular, but now it seemed as though everyone—*everyone*—knew of them, and some even went so far as to exchange little tokens carved with the boys' names and iconography with one another in their own sort of black market.

"Focus," she said to the shaman. "We need to be in place when Junseo gives the signal."

She met the Bangtan leader's eyes across the square, where an enormous pyre had been built. Despite the chaos and consternation caused by the presence of the performance troupe in their midst, the crowd was rather subdued, and an uneasy air hung over the proceedings. It had been several years since the last public execution of a magician in Urghud, and the pile of kindling in the center was a stark reminder of the uncertain times through which they were all living. Rumors of abominations in the south, the undead to the west, and the Heralds of Glorious Justice on their front steps, bringing with them hundreds of refugees from the steppe villages and the possibility of civil war. Magic was returning to the Morning Realms, twenty years after the north thought it eradicated during the Just War.

And for the first time in two years, a magician had been found in their midst.

"Here." Auncle Mongke surreptitiously handed their niece a bright red hood, a few shades lighter than her distinctive ruddy hair. "Don't forget to put it on when the time comes."

"I won't." Yuli tucked the hood into her coat and rearranged the dull brown scarf covering her face and hair. "But it won't do us any good if no one's paying attention to me because of the Bangtan Brothers."

It appeared as though the northern chapter of the Guardians of Dawn had underestimated the Bangtan Brothers' popularity. Junseo

and the other boys had experience in smuggling magicians to safety in other parts of the empire, but no one had taken into account their growing fame when organizing this rescue mission. The plan was to hide a few of the members among the crowd until the right moment, when the prisoner was being led to the pyre, before setting off a series of distractions, during which Yuli—dressed in her bright red hood—would grab the victim and run. Junseo, Sungho, Taeri, and Yoochun would then put on and take off their own red hoods in the crowd to act as decoys, while Bohyun, Mihoon, and Alyosha would continue raising mayhem with magic.

A classic bit of misdirection, Sungho had said. One of the oldest tricks of the stage.

But the members weren't exactly going unnoticed, especially Bohyun, whose handsome face might have been his greatest asset onstage but was his greatest liability when trying to mingle.

Which brought Yuli back to her original problem: visibility.

"The Huntsmen have arrived!" a crier shouted, and the crowd's attention was momentarily diverted from the Bangtan Brothers to the cadre of riders galloping through Urghud's eastern gate. Yuli drew her scarf tighter about her face as the wolf-helmed rider at the head of the column bore down on the square—Maltak Ogodei, son of the Falconer and his father's proxy while the Kestrels held the imperial city against the encroaching force of the Heralds and their allies down south.

"Citizens!" Ogodei called from atop his restless mount. "Rejoice, for today we rid the north of a pernicious evil!"

Yuli rolled her eyes. The Huntsmen were little more than a rowdy rabble of raucous university students, more concerned with personal glory than with protecting the people from the threat of magic. In the Falconer's absence, Ogodei had taken up the Kestrels' charge to hunt down and pass judgment on anyone with even the most tenuous connection to treason, harassing and terrorizing the populace in the name of order and safety. Neither he nor any of the Huntsmen had ever faced down true evil—not a single abomination or revenant or even a member of the Heralds of Glorious Justice.

Until today.

The crowd gave a wary, half-hearted cheer. Executions of magicians and their sympathizers were meant to be public, to act as both a deterrent and entertainment for the audience, but there were more than a few—Yuli included—who did not have the stomach for it.

“Come, mimi,” Ogodei said, gesturing to the small, plump figure on a docile mare beside him. “Bring forth the abomination!”

Yuli stiffened as Maltak Kho, First Daughter of the Maltak Kang, urged her horse forward. Draped over the pommel of her saddle was a slight figure, bound and blindfolded. For a moment, Yuli saw another figure lying there—redheaded and all too familiar—before she blinked away the memory. The last time she’d faced Maltak Kho had been at an occasion much like this two years before, when it had been her cousin, Jochi, facing the pyre. As though sensing Yuli’s stare, Kho frowned and scanned the crowd from atop her mount, her dark, long-lashed eyes immediately catching on Yuli’s as though they were the only two in the square.

The force of Kho’s gaze shot through Yuli like an arrow—barbed and hooked, catching on all the soft, tender parts of her soul. For a long moment, the girls stared at each other, two years of regret and resentment hanging heavy between them.

“Mimi,” Ogodei hissed. “The prisoner.”

Kho startled at the sound of her brother’s voice, breaking the spell between them. Yuli pulled her scarf tighter over her hair and face, trying to disappear back into the crowd. Her pulse pounded in her ears, and she could feel her cheeks glowing nearly as bright as her hair. Kho dismounted and gently lifted the prisoner off her horse, setting them awkwardly on their feet. Beside her, Yuli heard her aunt suck in a sharp breath, the bells of their pointed, twin-tailed shaman cap jingling uneasily as shocked murmurs rose all around them.

“Behold!” Ogodei called triumphantly. “The abomination to be purged!”

The abomination in question was a child, no older than seven or eight. The crowd shifted uneasily on their feet; it was one thing to cheer for the execution of hardened criminals, but a child was another

matter altogether. Yuli reached into her coat for the red hood, looking around for the Bangtan Brothers. The mission had grown even more urgent, but none of the boys were in a position to set off the distractions.

She had to take matters into her own hands.

The Council of Shamans had gathered around the pyre and begun singing, a low, thrumming drone that resounded throughout the square as they prepared to sing the child's soul to the eternal blue skies. Slowly, smoothly, Yuli reached into her sleeve to pull out her brush, just enough to hold it between her left thumb and forefinger, palming the rest from view. Her mind grasped for character for *fire*, one of the first spells she had ever learned from *The Thousand-Character Classic*, although she had had little occasion to practice or use it. She quickly surveyed her surroundings; no one was watching. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her left hand and quickly sketched the spell before her, drawing on the void as the Guardians of Dawn had taught her. A glowing white-gold glyph shimmered in the air, and Yuli carefully, surreptitiously maneuvered the magic through the crowd with slight gestures. She wove the spell in and around their legs and feet, toward the pile of dried yak dung and kindling.

"Come on, come on," she murmured, willing the pyre to catch fire as Kho walked the child up to the stake. A bead of sweat rolled down her hairline, but no one seemed to have noticed her strange behavior. No one, save a youth in ragged furs on the other side of the square.

Anxiety drove a sharp spike of cold through her middle as she caught their gaze. What had they seen? How much had they seen? Had they even understood whatever it was they saw? The youth said nothing and raised no alarms, merely tilting their head so that their curls glinted with a hint of auburn. Yuli's hand strayed to her own auburn tresses hidden beneath her scarf in disbelief, wondering if she had seen a ghost.

"Jochi?"

Whoosh! The entire pyre suddenly went up in a blaze, sending a blast of hot air rippling over those closest to the conflagration. Kho threw

up her hands in surprise, releasing her hold on the child. Yuli immediately swapped her dull brown scarf for her bright red hood and ran forward, sweeping up the little magician in her arms.

“The Heralds!” came a cry from the crowd. Yuli thought she recognized Alyosha’s deep baritone. Thank the Great Bear the boys knew how to improvise. “The Heralds of Glorious Justice are here!”

At once the audience broke into pandemonium, shouts of panic and terror as the people scrambled for shelter. The Heralds had been harrying the northern boundaries for weeks now, and the fear topmost on every citizen’s mind was the possibility of a guerrilla fighter in their midst. *Bam!* A minor explosion of dirt and debris went off on the far side of the square, and the crowd roiled, scattering in all directions and churning up clouds of dust that covered everything in a faint haze.

“The abomination!” Ogodei shouted over the chaos. “Don’t let them escape, you fools!”

Junseo materialized by her side, his own red hood at the ready. She immediately traded hers for her brown scarf as the Bangtan leader donned his cap, acting as a decoy. He disappeared into the crowd, his tall height an easy target for the riders on horseback.

“There!” Ogodei called, pointing in his direction. “Follow that red hood!”

Bam! Another explosion, and more shrieks of surprise. Several of the Huntsmen’s mounts spooked, bucking and rearing, causing even more mayhem in the crowd. Another red hood popped up several yards away, and Ogodei roared, unable to turn his horse and maneuver through the throng. In the midst of the tumult, no one noticed Yuli slip toward the mercantile district with a suspiciously child-shaped bundle in her arms, a bundle that was growing heavier and more unwieldy with each passing moment.

All save one.

“You!” came Kho’s voice from atop her horse. “Halt!” She frowned. “Yuli?”

“Mother of Demons,” Yuli swore. She could feel her scarf slipping off her head, revealing her distinctive hair. She let the child down on their feet and rearranged her head covering, scanning the crowd for

a member of the Bangtan Brothers. She spied a bright red hood in the distance, drawing the attention of the other Huntsmen, but Kho stared her down, her long-lashed eyes narrowed with both suspicion and disbelief. Reaching for the knife in her boot, Yuli swiftly cut the child's bonds and removed the blindfold from their face. The little magician looked frightened and bewildered, but there was no time to explain. "Can you run?" she asked.

They blinked in confusion but nodded.

"Then run!" Yuli grabbed the child's hand and half dragged, half carried them toward the mercantile district.

"Where are we going?" they cried.

"Not now," she gritted out. The Guardians of Dawn safe house was a run-down secondhand bookshop at far end of the marketplace. "Just keep up."

Behind them, Kho struggled with her horse in the crowd before giving up and dismounting to pursue them on foot. Yuli was taller, faster, but burdened with a prisoner she was trying to help escape. It wouldn't be long before Kho caught up to them, and while Yuli was reasonably sure she could overpower the other girl if necessary, the last thing she needed was to be definitively outed as a magician sympathizer. Her best bet would be to try to lose Kho in the myriad turns and alleyways of the mercantile district.

"This way!"

Left, then right, then right again. At least the child was quick. They might have been small and frail, but they were swift and agile, leaping over carts and barrels, bobbing and weaving around various obstacles as well as any competitor during the summer sporting events on the steppes. They were quick but not quick enough, and soon, Yuli could hear Kho's voice shouting clearly over the din of the crowd.

"You there! Halt! I command you to stop!"

Suddenly, the auburn-haired youth from the square appeared before them, gesturing frantically down a darkened passageway. Yuli did not question their appearance nor their aid, immediately ducking down the space to find a narrow path running along the back of several storefronts and a low boundary wall, which stretched to both the left

and the right. She could hear Kho's booted footsteps crunching along the gravel and dirt behind them and took a gamble, turning left and squeezing through rancid piles of refuse and rubbish, taking advantage of the shadows and obstacles that hid them from view.

The footsteps stopped.

Yuli chanced a glance over her shoulder. Kho stood at the cross-roads, craning her head this way and that for a glimpse of her quarry. Yuli pressed herself flat against the building, holding her hand out to shield the child and to keep them from sight. There was a flicker of movement at the other end of passageway, a glint of auburn, and Kho immediately turned and followed that specter in the opposite direction.

It was a long moment before Yuli allowed herself to relax and catch her breath. Whoever—whatever—that youth was, they had just saved their lives, or at least given them a bit of a reprieve.

"Who are you?" the child asked in a trembling voice. Their eyes were overlarge in their pinched face, the hollows too sunken, the cheekbones and chin too sharp. Up close, the little magician was older than she had initially thought; their malnourished body gave the impression that they were quite young, but there was a weariness in their expression that spoke to years of hard living. Ten, or perhaps even older. Ogodei had called them a *pernicious evil*, but they were hardly a threat to anyone, despite the magic in their veins.

"I am," Yuli said, remembering to tuck stray strands of her red hair back into her scarf, "a member of the Guardians of Dawn."

To her surprise, instead of gratitude—or even relief—the child's shoulders slumped with what seemed like disappointment. "Not the Heralds of Glorious Justice?"

"No." Yuli frowned. "Is that who you were expecting?"

They shrugged. "The Guardians of Dawn haven't done a single thing for the magicians of the Morning Realms," they said. "But the Heralds are out there fighting for our freedom. I thought you had come to recruit me."

"Recruit you?" Yuli raised her brows. "No, we came to rescue you."

"From what?" the child scoffed.

She gestured back toward the square. "From being burned alive?"

They shrugged again, and Yuli did not know what disturbed her more: the indifference in the gesture or the resignation in their expression.

"Come on," she said, holding out her hand. "We need to get you to safety."

"And where's that?"

"Tarkhun's bookshop," she said. "You know it?"

They nodded. "At the end of the Street of the Spear."

"Good, because that's where I want you to go in case we get separated."

"What if the Huntsmen catch me?"

"I won't allow that to happen."

The little magician eyed her warily. "How can I trust you?"

Yuli resisted the urge to stamp her feet with frustration, swallowing down her impatience. They were only a child, after all. "Because I'm a magician too."

"Prove it."

They didn't have time for this, but Yuli removed one of her mittens and held out her bare hand to the little magician. They took her fingers in theirs, and the hum of bone-deep recognition rose at their touch, the chaos in their blood resonating. The child relaxed.

"Can we go now?" Yuli glanced worriedly around them. At the far end of the narrow passageway, she could see the shadows of people still fleeing the square, chased by the deafening hooves of Ogodei's Huntsmen. They would have to find some way of blending in with the crowd. Yuli fingered the red hood hidden in her coat sleeve, then looked down at the child shivering in their thin woolen tunic and trousers. "Here," she said, removing her dull brown scarf and wrapping it around their head. "We need to change our appearance. Be ready to run when I tell you."

They made their way to the street entrance, and Yuli carefully leaned out to survey their surroundings. The majority of the commotion seemed to have subsided, but a Huntsman on horseback slowly

patrolled the street on the far side, blocking the way to the Street of the Spear. She stiffened at the sight of the wolf helm; it was not just any Huntsman, but Ogodei. Yuli cursed beneath her breath.

“Stay where you are,” she whispered to the child, pulling her red hood out from her coat sleeve. “I’ll distract the Huntsman. Once the way is clear, run straight for Tarkhun’s bookshop and don’t look back.”

The child nodded. Yuli slipped on the bright red hood over her own auburn hair and stepped out into the street.

“Hoi!” she shouted, waving her arms about. “Over here!”

At the sight of red, Ogodei whirled his mount around, kicking into a gallop. Yuli ran in the opposite direction as fast as her long legs could carry her.

Now! she cried, touching her mind to the child’s. The ability to communicate mind-to-mind was one of the Guardian of Wind’s gifts, and the only useful one as far as Yuli was concerned. The little magician took off without a second thought, leaving her alone with the Maltak Huntsman on her heels.

The breath burned in Yuli’s chest as she pumped her arms and legs as hard as she could. She was fast, but not even she could outrun a galloping horse. But she didn’t need to outrun the Maltak Huntsman for long—only long enough for her to duck and hide somewhere.

Then she would give Ogodei a *real* hunt.

Leaping over barrels and burlap bags filled with foodstuffs, Yuli quickly turned down a narrow alleyway and crouched down behind stacks of supplies. She could hear the horse’s hooves thundering ever closer, but stopped to close her eyes and take a deep breath.

And exhaled her spirit.

The instant sensation of weightlessness, of freedom, pure, expansive potential. She was formless, shapeless, in the air and everywhere, and for a moment, Yuli allowed her ki to float free, reveling in exhilaration. Spirit-walking was the Guardian of Wind’s other gift, and while it was not always the most practical, it had always been the most exciting.

Concentrating, she pulled the image of herself together—tall, broad-shouldered, freckled, and wearing a red hood—and launched her spirit from her hiding place. She ran past Ogodei and his horse in

the opposite direction in a blur of speed, and she could sense his shout of surprise as his mount startled and reared.

Once more that sense of exhilaration ran through her. No longer imprisoned by the earthly burden of flesh, Yuli could duck, weave, dart, and fly without the constraints of exhaustion or fatigue. The Maltak Huntsman was no match for her speed, not when she no longer had to concern herself with such mundane matters as breath and weight and limbs. Every few moments she paused and waited for Ogodei to catch up, laughing as she dodged his grasping hands, which passed through her spirit form like air. She was getting reckless, but she couldn't help but needle him. Play with him. Toy with him. So often as a child, Yuli had trailed confusion and chaos in her wake, playing pranks on her elders and peers, crowing with triumph as they failed to catch her. What she loved best about being free of her body was that she could run and run and run for days without slowing, without tiring, without worrying about injury or obstacles or anything but the open skies. She could do this forever. She wanted to do this forever.

"What is this devilry?" Ogodei cried. "What is this abomination?"

And suddenly it wasn't a game anymore. Yuli felt the cord tethering her spirit to her vessel snap tight with anxiety, and she resisted the inexorable pull back to her body. She had been more than reckless; she had been a fool, brazenly flaunting her magic and her abilities without a second thought to the consequences. If Ogodei got a good look at her spirit form, if he caught a glimpse of the red hair beneath the hood, he would recognize her as the First Daughter of the Gommun Kang, as the granddaughter of the late Warlord, as—

Yuli returned to her body with a gasp.

"Another abomination walks among us!" Ogodei cried. "Huntsmen, rally to me! To me!"

There was a clattering of hooves against dirt as the other riders came from all corners of the marketplace.

"We muster at Maltak Manor tonight," the wolf-helmed warrior said. "And tomorrow at dawn, the hunt for the red hood begins. Search every home, every residence, every business. Be on your guard; there may be more than one."

The thumping of fists against shoulders in salute. Yuli held her breath, crouched down in her hiding place behind piles of grain and other foodstuffs. “Hail!” the Huntsmen shouted as one. “Tomorrow at dawn!”

Tomorrow at dawn. Yuli thought of the safe house at the end of the Street of the Spear and closed her eyes. The Guardians of Dawn might have rescued the little magician from the pyre, but the child was in just as much danger as before. They all were.

She felt the prickling tickle of someone’s gaze at the back of her neck. Yuli opened her eyes in alarm and looked up to catch the same auburn-haired youth—the one from the square, the one who had helped them—staring back at her. She could not quite decipher the expression in their dark copper eyes, but when she blinked, they were gone.



THE ROAD FROM KALANTZE TO THE BITTEREST north was haunted.

Zhara had always been rather ambivalent about ghosts. Growing up, she had read tales of vengeful spooks and woebegone spirits but had preferred her little romance novels borrowed from Master Cao's bookshop in the Pits. According to the stories, ghosts lingered where there was unfinished business—an injustice unaddressed, a sin unpunished, or a generational curse unbroken. Although she had lost her own parents at a young age, the proper rites had been observed and their ki sent on to the cauldron of the universe by the death nuns of the Azure Isles to be reborn and remade anew. She had never had anything to worry about from lost souls except for the occasional thrill from a horror novel that kept her up at night.

But after the past ten days, she was no longer so sure of her convictions.

"Stop fiddling with those," Gaden gently reprimanded Ami as she continuously, furiously wiped at her glasses with a corner of the scarf wrapped around her neck. "You'll only make it worse."

"This constant condensation is driving me to the brink," Ami complained as she replaced her spectacles on her face, whereupon they instantly fogged up again. "I can't *see* anything."

"It's because it's cold," said Gaden kindly.

"I *know* that," Ami said irritably. "I just wish I could figure out a way to stop it."

"You're a magician," Han pointed out. "Surely you can find a spell that prevents your glasses from misting up in the first place."

"I would if I could see *through* them," she muttered. By habit, she

reached for the fragments of *Songs of Order and Chaos* she carried tucked into her sash at all times. “And if my fingertips weren’t in danger of freezing off.”

The hardships of the road had taken a toll on all of them—Zhara, Ami, Gaden, Okonwe, and even Han, whose good cheer had carried him all the way from Zanhei to the outermost west but had withered in the face of such brutal cold. Zhara had never been more miserable in her entire life, and she had spent most of it sleeping on the dirt floor of her stepmother’s kitchen. Born and raised in the southern climes, she was unused to the bone-slicing chill, and the exhaustion of her body left her even more vulnerable to the plunging temperatures. Not even the warmth of Sajah’s cat form around her shoulders could stave off the bite of winter.

The strange emptiness of the towns on the way to the Sweet Sea did not help matters.

“Another one,” Han muttered as they passed yet another abandoned village on their route—animal pens empty, wooden buildings hollow. “Is there anyone left on the northern road?”

“Another victim of the Heralds of Glorious Justice, I bet,” Gaden said bitterly. Many of the smaller villages and outposts along the way had been claimed in the name of magician liberation, their residents vanished—either fled to Urghud or joined to the Heralds’ cause.

“I don’t know,” Han said with a frown. “I don’t see the banner of the Four-Winged Dragon anywhere.”

It felt as though they had been on the trail of the Heralds for weeks now. Zhara knew that the more militant wing of the Guardians of Dawn was on the march toward the imperial city, but beyond that, news had been scarce to nonexistent. Many of the Guardians’ safe houses farther south had begun to sympathize with the Heralds of Glorious Justice, believing magicians and their allies should rise up to seize power for themselves in the wake of the Warlord’s death. But there were other forces in the empire that would resist such a rebellion, and the Morning Realms teetered on the edge of civil war.

Okonwe shook his head and pulled a battered map from his sash, spreading it atop their cart pulled by a pair of long-suffering yak.

“We’re ten days out from Dafeng,” he said, pointing to the northernmost city in the Middle Kingdom of the empire. “It’s likely the Heralds would have turned west toward the imperial city from there.”

“Then what happened here?” Ami asked, squinting over the tops of her spectacles at their surroundings. The skeletal remains of tents and more permanent structures looked ghoulish in the fading light, canvas and fur flapping in the bitter breeze, the movement reminding Zhara of ghosts.

“A raiding party?” Han asked.

Okonwe looked uncertain. “Perhaps,” he said. “Although I feel there would be other signs of violence. Broken arrows, churned turf, marks of a skirmish.” He furrowed his brow. “It seems as though the people here just . . . left.”

Zhara shuddered. The eerie, haunted sensation rose up around her again, pressing on her ears, making the hairs at the back of her neck stand on end. “Let’s move on,” she said. “I’d rather not camp here for the night, if you all don’t mind.”

“We still have an hour or so of light left,” Okonwe said. “We can press on for a little while. I’d rather not linger myself,” he admitted. “There’s something . . . unnerving about this place.”

“We’re all jumping at ghosts,” Ami said quietly.

Ghosts. The word fell over the party like a blanket of snow, and shivers arose from them all that had nothing to do with the cold. Zhara pulled out the crystal encased in glass at her throat, the stone she had taken from the caves beneath Mount Llangposa. The crystal was made of magic, glowing in its presence and dimming before demonic energy. It gave off a faint rosy-gold light, reassuring her that all was well.

For now.

“Then it’s settled,” she said. “Let’s get moving.”



A strange, keening draft picked up in the last hour of twilight, an eldritch, voiced wind that sang as it swirled around them. It brought with it the dry, icy scent of snow and—Zhara wrinkled her nose—a

curious emptiness that reminded her of the nothingness of death. They had all fallen silent as they walked, huddled together for warmth and comfort. Their way was lit by the softly glowing horn of Rinqi, the Unicorn of the West, and Zhara and Ami held aloft the illuminated magic crystals from the caverns beneath Mount Llangposa to keep the shadows at bay.

"Maybe we should have stopped at that abandoned village after all," Han said beneath his breath. "It's even creepier out here than it was back there."

Zhara couldn't disagree, slightly regretting their decision. "Just a little while longer," she said. "At least until this wind dies down and we can start a fire."

"There are people up ahead," Ami said quietly, pressing her glasses up her nose. The enchanted spectacles Zhara had given her granted her friend the ability to see the threads of ki woven throughout the world, just as they would appear to the girls in their Guardian forms.

Okonwe's hand strayed to the broadax strapped to his back. "People?"

She nodded. "Two," she said, a furrow appearing between her brows. "I think . . . I think one of them is a magician. But their ki is . . . different."

The big, black-skinned man lowered his hand, although he did not relax. "Tread carefully," he warned. "Magician or no, we don't know where their allegiances lie."

Zhara nervously glanced at the blade stashed with their supplies in the back of the yak-drawn cart. They had not come across any bandits, abominations, or undead on the road, nor had they come across any Heralds in the course of their journey, but their ever-present threat had hung over their heads the entire time. Although she had faced down greater demons and monsters before, Zhara thought she would be perfectly content if she never had to raise her hand in battle ever again.

The others prepared themselves for the encounter; Han readied a staff while Gaden put on a mask to obscure their scars. Ami brought out a horned headdress from the cart and fitted it over Rinqi's head to

disguise her horn, as well as blankets and saddles to cover her distinctive body. Unlike Sajah, the Unicorn of the West could not change her form to hide her true nature, and the farther they ventured into northern territory, the more hostile—physically and politically—the landscape would become.

As they drew closer, Zhara could make out the dark silhouette of a lonely circular tent made of felt and fur.

“A message waypost,” Okonwe said with relief.

“How can you tell?” Han asked.

The big man nodded at the few horses in a nearby paddock, short, stocky, and hardy-looking, their coats fuzzy instead of smooth. “Our four-legged messengers.”

They had seen a few wayposts along their journey, and had sheltered at more than a few. Zhara’s spirits lifted at the prospect of having a potential place to stay for the night, in the company of other humans instead of haunts.

“Hail!” Okonwe boomed in his deep, bass voice. “Any room for a party of travelers?”

The tent flap opened and a small figure with a long, thin mustache emerged. “Hail, travelers,” they said cautiously. “What brings them to my ger at this late an hour?”

The party turned to Han, who cleared his throat. “*Summer, fall, winter, spring,*” he sang, singing the Guardians of Dawn password phrase. Of them all, he had the most pleasant voice.

The postmaster blinked and stared in bewilderment. “Bit touched, are we?”

The group exchanged wary glances. Not a safe house, despite the presence of a magician.

“Just overtired,” Okonwe supplied. “We could use a place to rest. We’ve come all the way from Dafeng, and there have been precious few places to stay on the road.”

The postmaster peered at them in the dark, taking in the big man’s complexion, Gaden’s masked face, and the strange assortment of animals by the cart. Zhara looked to Ami, who gave a slight shake of her head. Not a magician. The other must be inside.

After a long moment, the postmaster relented. "Come in," they said, pushing the flap open wider. "It does no good to dwell in the open after nightfall. It is the hour when haunts and hungry ghosts roam the roads, after all."

"Hungry ghosts?" Zhara asked.

"Ganshi," the postmaster said. "Disembodied spirits who will try to suck out your ki and possess your empty vessel."

Like demons. Zhara caught Ami's eye, and she could see the same thought had crossed the scrivener's mind. They followed the postmaster inside the ger after securing the yak and Rinqi in the paddock with the horses. Sajah refused to dirty his paws with the livestock and transformed himself into a little mouse to hide up Zhara's sleeve.

From the outside, the tent had not appeared like much, but the interior was spacious, comfortable, clean, and *warm*. The space was partitioned off with hanging hides to cleverly create the illusion of rooms, and at the center of the ger was a lit brazier, the smoke escaping through a small hole in the middle of the roof. Over the flames was a large cast-iron wok, and the sizzling smell of onions and fried meat filled the air. Beside it was a pot of what looked to be gruel of some kind.

"Sorry, I was just preparing dinner." The postmaster cleared some room on the floor around the brazier. "Sit, sit, make yourselves at home, friends," they said, eschewing formalities in the northern fashion. "My name is Basho, and I offer my sincere apologies for being such an inadequate host."

"All will be forgiven," Han said, practically drooling as he stared at the food, "for a plate of whatever is cooking there."

"Just a quick pheasant stir-fry, nothing fancy," Basho replied. "But you are welcome to partake of what I have."

"We have rations we can share," Okonwe offered. "Dried meats and tsampa."

"Respectfully, I would decline the tsampa," Gaden said. "One can only eat it so many days in a row before the tongue yearns for something with flavor."

They all sat down on the clean dirt floor as Basho passed around

bowls filled with gruel, topped with steaming meat and vegetables. Everyone tucked in with gusto, their hunger a greater spice than any their food had been seasoned with. Everyone except Ami, who was looking around the ger in confusion.

“Where is the other person?”

Basho stiffened mid-bite. “Other person?”

Zhara gave her friend a warning glance.

“I, er, I just thought there was someone else here,” the scrivener stammered.

The postmaster narrowed their eyes. “There is,” they said cautiously. “My brother, Nurden.” They tilted their head toward one of the partitions draped at the back of the tent. “But he is ill with the waking dreamer sickness.”

Gaden frowned. “The waking dreamer sickness?”

“Have you not heard?” Basho resumed eating. “I’ve passed along many messages from people all over the north about a mysterious plague afflicting parts of the empire.”

Zhara thought of the abandoned village they had passed before arriving at Basho’s ger. A plague. She thought of the outbreak of abomination that had riddled Zanhei and the undead infection that had swept through the west. She slid a glance to Ami, who was blinking rapidly with either excitement or anxiety. Perhaps both. If Basho wasn’t the magician, then it must be Nurden, hiding behind the partition.

Okonwe shook his head. “As I’ve said, we’ve been on the road a good while. Most of the places we’ve seen have been abandoned, their inhabitants gone. We’ve assumed most had fled the coming war or joined the rebels.”

Basho studied them all closely. “The Heralds of Glorious Justice?”

Tension filled the tent and Zhara straightened in her seat.

“Yes,” Okonwe said carefully. “I believe that’s what they’re called.”

The postmaster looked grim. “Aye,” they said. “They’ve not come this way, although I hear stories of them from the travelers fleeing north to Urghud.” They gave them all a considering look. “Are you refugees yourself?”

Zhara looked to the big man, who shook his head again. "We're couriers on our way to meet a shipment of goods coming in from the Azure Isles at Arkhevet."

"I see." Another pregnant pause. "Strange times, these," Basho murmured. "Abominations to the south, the undead to the west, and now the waking dreamer sickness on our thresholds. To say nothing of the coming war."

"When the world is out of balance, the Guardians of Dawn are reborn," Ami said quietly.

Sajah started in Zhara's sleeve, but the postmaster did not appear alarmed. "Aye," they said again. "I've heard too of these tales. Legendary warriors walk the Morning Realms once more, as they did over a millennia before to seal the Mother of Ten Thousand Demons back into her realm."

"Do you believe it?" Han asked in a guarded tone.

Basho met his gaze, then shrugged. "The matter of magic is beyond my concern," they said. "I have messages to deliver and an ailing younger brother to care for."

Zhara relaxed and looked toward the partition at the back of the tent. "May I ask what happened to Nurden?" She could feel Ami's eyes boring into the side of her face, silently communicating something she did not quite understand.

"I don't know." Basho refilled their empty bowl and rose to their feet, moving to the partition and drawing it back. On the other side was a young man lying supine on a pile of furs. A jagged scar cut from the corner of his right lip to his temple, long healed but wicked. His wind-darkened complexion was ashen and wan, his eyes were half-lidded and staring into nothing, and if it weren't for the slow, scarcely perceptible rise and fall of his chest, Zhara might have thought he was dead. "But one day he lay down and never got up again."

"Waking dreamer," Ami murmured, fingers twitching, eyes distant. Zhara knew she itched to pull out her notes on *Songs of Order and Chaos*. "I've heard that phrase before, but I'm not sure I know of a waking dreamer sickness."

Basho pulled up a stool and sat beside their brother, balancing the

bowl precariously on their lap as they leaned over to angle Nurden's head toward them for food. Ami sucked in a sharp breath.

"Here, let me help," Zhara said softly, kneeling beside Basho and angling her arms beneath the young man's back. She could feel Sajah squirming with discomfort against her wrist.

"Thank you," the postmaster said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't trouble you like this."

"Zhara," Ami began, then paused. There was something approaching fear in the scrivener's face, but Zhara could not understand why.

The postmaster gently tipped the bowl of gruel against their brother's lips, and Nurden swallowed reflexively. Zhara's hands trembled slightly as she supported the young man, her fingers mere inches away from the bare skin of his neck. Ami could see the world as though with Guardian eyes at all times through her enchanted spectacles, but Zhara—like any other magician—could sense another magician by touch, and she was dying of curiosity to see whether Nurden was one of them.

"What was your brother like?" Han asked gently. Zhara knew he was thinking of his own little brother, Anyang, back at the palace in Zanhei.

Basho looked down at Nurden's scarred face and sighed. "Sensitive. Empathetic. Prone to strange fits sometimes. We didn't realize he had the Taint until he had a run-in with the Kestrels when he was a small child."

"The Taint?" Zhara asked, her fingers creeping ever closer to the skin of Nurden's neck, curiosity warring with propriety.

"When is a magician not a magician?" Basho said softly. "When they have the affliction but not the ability."

Silence blanketed the ger, the word *magician* falling like a thud to the ground.

Han studied the unconscious young man. "Your brother is an anti-magician?" he asked carefully.

"Is that what they call it?" The postmaster picked up the bowl of gruel again. "Here in the north, we call it the Taint. Or have, ever since the Just War. The Kestrels can identify a magician or one tainted by

magic by touch, and those with the affliction but not the ability were not executed but taken away to serve the Falconer in his corps of hunters.” Basho closed their eyes. “My family had always been sympathetic to magicians, but my brother’s Taint brought too much scrutiny. We fled the city that night.”

“That’s it!” Ami said excitedly. Five heads turned to look at her in surprise. “*Waking dreamer* is the old word for *anti-magician*.”

“Waking dreamer is so much better than anti-magician,” Han grumbled. “I’m going to call myself that from now on.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Okonwe asked in a low voice. “How do you know you can trust us?”

The postmaster shrugged. “Who would you tell?” they asked reasonably. “There’s no one around for miles. In a city, surrounded by hundreds of others, everyone is suspect, whether or not you were a magician or an ally. But out here”—they gestured to the darkness outside—“survival is a different matter. As I’ve said, the matter of magic is beyond my concern.”

“Basho,” Ami said hesitantly. “Do you—do you know your brother is . . . empty?”

Zhara looked up in surprise. The fear had not left Ami’s face, and whatever the scrivener saw through her enchanted spectacles was enough to give Zhara pause.

“Empty?” Basho was taken aback. “I suppose you could describe someone afflicted with the waking dreamer sickness that way. Asleep, awake, and neither. As though the spirit were gone, even though the body still lives.”

The body still lives. Zhara thought of the undead, their vessels empty of ki. How could one be devoid of essence but still be alive? She brought her bare hand to rest against the back of Nurden’s neck, curiosity having finally won.

She didn’t know what she had expected. Ami had said he was empty, but Nurden was not empty the way a bowl was empty; he was hollowed out the way a creature would leave tracks in the sand. She could sense the impression of who he had been, the muted magical resonance of the ki that should have been there, but there was nothing. An impression

of the person he was had been left behind, and Zhara felt that absence like an ache.

And yet.

Something stirred in that absence, that void waiting to be filled. Something dark and familiar, something that reminded Zhara of coming upon the tombs of captured magicians beneath the slopes of Mount Zanhei. Zhara gasped.

“What?” Basho asked. “What is it?”

She immediately drew away and met Ami’s gaze. She knew now what it was that the scrivener had seen.

Demon.