

Chapter 2 - Feraj's Blood

Range, the other Skuhies, and Cellach made their way to the chamber. As far as he was aware, this was the inaugural visit of any Skuhy to the scholars' chamber.

It was massive, nothing like he had imagined. He had thought it would be a cozier place to retreat, for in the Skuhies' minds they thought the scholars brilliant, but lazy.

With his first glance in the great room, Range surmised the scholars cared little of time. They were more industrious than he realized. There were no windows, no clocks, no hints in the chamber to indicate day or night. Hardwood bookshelves rose tens of feet above the floor and blocked most of the walls, leaving little of the dust-covered, cracked limestone facade visible. In the corners of the chamber, scroll upon scroll littered thick oak tables held together with iron bands on each end. Burning candles emitted the only reading light.

The scholars had allowed only one modification in many

years to interrupt the relative solitude of the chamber, the only rumor Range had heard that seemed to be true. It sat directly in the middle of the chamber and had become the key research tool of the scholars: the Epochsphere.

As legend had it, it was an invention of Feraj and of mysterious design. Some scholars even believed the spirit of Feraj powered the Epochsphere because he had died shortly after its completion.

The size of a large boulder, the charged globe hovered above a pool of thick gel that glowed with twelve icons and, unlike the candles, emitted a great amount of green light. In the darkness, a few points of the sphere exploded into such dazzling spectacles that Range had to shield his eyes with his paw.

As his eyes adjusted, he noticed the silhouettes of two of the eldest scholars, Piran and Elias, who were staring at the globe. He was accustomed to the stoic expressions that scholars generally held, so he didn't need his sense in detecting emotion to tell him that remorse and suffering shown on their faces. The shadowy contrast accompanied with flashing light accentuated their painful expressions. They watched each of the eruptions with an uncanny focus, and then, after each eruption, collectively shook their heads.

Once the eruptions subsided, Range recognized the outlines

etched in light on the sphere and deduced that each eruption represented a location in their world. Following each blast, a short series of three-dimensional images projected from the sphere and out into the chamber. Range tried to concentrate on each of the scenes, but they occurred too close together for him to make out the detail of any one. What was clear was that each of the projections contained violent images of massive destruction and a loss of life.

He turned his attention to the scholars. The men, like all scholars, wore deep brown cowls. Both Elias and Piran had gaunt faces with hooked noses and were bald on top. A strip of wispy white hair wrapped around the back of each head from ear to ear. Range remembered who was who only because Piran was much taller than Elias. In fact, he and Elias met eye to eye. By human standards, Elias was short, barely standing over five-feet tall. The Skuhies suspected that his lack of stature was the reason he always spoke with an edgy tone.

"There was nothing we could have done to stop them?" Elias asked.

"No. This was beyond even our influence," said Piran.

"What are we going to do if he is the child? It's too dangerous to keep him here."

Then another spot on the Epochsphere exploded into a rainbow of colors. New images projected above them and Range

recognized the colossal sand structures outside the city of Rocai, or, more appropriately, what was left of them. The largest of the pyramids now lay as a mountain of broken stone.

Range caught himself staring and nearly walked into one of the oak tables. Though his mishap announced their presence to Elias and Piran, it didn't seem to unnerve them or interrupt their deliberation.

"What I meant was how are we going to get him across?" Elias asked.

"The stones aren't the only way to cross, you know," Cellach said, placing a hand on the shorter man's shoulder as he walked around him. "In Feraj's world, they used an enchantment from a scroll to cross--"

Before Cellach could finish, another series of explosions blasted from the Epochsphere. Each eruption was followed by its own devastating scene of one of Nydimm's great cities being plundered, with billowing smoke, shuddered cries, and the abduction of a child, a common element throughout.

Range started to comprehend the tragedy he was witnessing. He turned to his comrades, who shared his pain, their ears pressed flat against their skulls in humility. A falsetto whine escaped their throats. Range tried to hold back, but once one started, it was impossible for the others to not follow suit.

As he and the other Skuhies howled, clarity deflated every

tuft of his being. The attacks on the cities themselves had been a diversion so they could draw out the children. Really, how could things have gone any worse? They had known of the attacks and that the children were being targeted in the plans, but they had been unable to save them. The horror was overwhelming. Seeing all of it now, the portent of more terror resonated with him and he cried aloud again.

He stopped only when his gaze fell upon the child. The boy sat nestled in Cellach's arms, staring at the Epochsphere, entertained by the showers of colors. At the thought of harm coming to the boy, Range instinctively marched in front of Cellach and crouched into a guard position. Front legs extended and locked on the floor, he kept watch of the boy. The scholar made eye contact with him and Range thought he saw Cellach's mouth slip into a slight grin.

The scholar then stepped around him and walked to the Epochsphere with the child. Range sprung to all fours and followed close behind. It was so quiet in the room he heard his own claws clicking against the limestone before the sound gave way to Cellach whispering to the child.

"We have precious little time..." the scholar said, looking down at Mith. "This is the moment we find out if you are who we think you are."

He set the boy on the ledge of the sphere's control base and unswaddled him. In plain view, resting where the child's navel should, was the glimmering mark that the boy was royalty. Cellach's already crinkled eyes narrowed further to study Mith. Holding him along one of his long arms, he took the index finger of his other hand and traced it down the child's plump chest toward the stone.

Range half expected Cellach's arm to give way, due to inactivity and age, but he held the boy firm. The scholar's finger stopped and he tapped the stone lightly. With it came the cloudy swirl that was the mark of the Cirri diamond.

"He's a Cirri child all right," Cellach said.

"But can you tell whether he's Mith?" Scout asked.

"Yes, is he the one?" Elias asked.

Range reflected on the rescue. It was intended to get both the boy and his mother to Genizah. The scholars first knew about the attacks months before, before the boy was even born, and they had spent days planning this rescue, even corresponding with Illyana, the boy's mother, so she could assist them. But the information the scholars had about the attacks was wrong. The Sundu launched the attacks early.

As if he had read Range's mind, Cellach turned to Scout, requesting the same information, *"What happened to his mother?"*

It was then that another fountain of green light exploded from the sphere and with it played the event that none of the Skuhies wanted to relive: the child's rescue at Gaerup. The scene started slow, the scholars able to witness the Skuhies' stealth in and around the castle. But then the events rapidly unfolded. The Skuhies scurried into the Illyana's bed chamber. Even in the projection's twitching images, their slack jaws adequately expressed their surprise in stumbling across the dark figure on the opposite balcony. It hovered over the woman like an immense ghost.

The scholars stumbled back from the image. It was only then that Range sensed Cellach's feelings, a mixture of fear and fascination. Mesmerized by the emotion and this overwhelming yearning to protect the child, Range felt the fur of his neck fold against his skull. A growl rumbled from his throat. The scholars regained their composure, studying him momentarily. He sensed a fleeting thought of wonderment from Elias and Piran.

"What's wrong with the Epochsphere? I can't get a good image on the figure," said Elias over the screams and explosions coming from the projection.

"Shhh," instructed Cellach. The group in the chamber all turned their attention to the moving images.

The specter stepped closer to the boy's mother, its broken voice scratching at the chamber's limestone walls. "Give me the boy."

"Never," said Illyana.

In hearing his mother's voice, the infant perked up.

The dark figure stepped toward the woman. It was almost on top of her now. "He is mine. You have no say in this, Illyana."

She recoiled and looked into her bed chamber. At this point, Scout snuck toward the child's cradle. It appeared as if the mother gave a nod to Scout. He sedated the child.

Range remembered there had been significant discussion among the scholars and the Skuhies about this approach. Illyana had objected. But ultimately, Cellach decided the escape was the most important thing to consider. This was the only way to ensure the child remained quiet.

"No. You have no say. Killing me won't even help you," Illyana said.

The figure grabbed her shoulders. She scurried back but there was nowhere to go. Her spine slammed against the railing of the balcony.

"Don't defy me, Illyana."

"He is not yours. You gave him up when you became *Death*," she said.

The sounds of cracking stone pierced the chamber and the top section of the railing snapped and crashed to the ground. Illyana struggled to hold her footing as her momentum started to carry her over the balcony's ledge. Black shadows in the form of hands attempted to hold her tight, keeping her on the ledge. But her momentum tore her from the figure's grasp and she slipped over the ledge. Her screams filled the morning air, blaring off the chamber walls.

The terror of the moment and the cries from his mother brought a wail from the baby, who had been spared this drama the first time. Cellach gave the child his gristly knuckle to suck on, and then turned his attention back to the holo footage.

In the overhead projection, Scout's floating depiction stood frozen in the middle of the bed chamber with the child. "I'm sorry. I wanted to help her," Scout said, reliving the moment's indecision.

"Scout, there was nothing you could have done," said Durham, giving his comrade a snuffle of his snout to complement the sympathy of his words.

"Listen to your friend, Scout," Cellach offered. You made the right choice."

The scene closed on the balcony, the spectral figure lingering on its ledge, black shadows, where a person's head and shoulders should be, slouched, as if lamenting its failure.

Behind the figure, the only hint of Scout's escape was his tail whipping around the door way. The bubble of moving images then vanished.

"So the boy's mother is dead?" Elias said.

"Yes. We checked the grounds and found her body," Durham said. "No pulse."

"Were you able to identify *that thing*?" asked Elias, shivering.

"No, but I can tell you this," Scout said, stepping ahead of the other Skuhies, his cinnamon mask furrowed into a scowl. "The images from the sphere weren't fuzzy. The figure was a series of living shadows. Every time it moved, the shadows moved with it."

"Illayna's death is surprising and tragic." Piran interjected, not engaged in the group's line of questioning, yet still staring at the Epochsphere and struggling with the clash between the sympathy of the moment and the logic required to move on. "And it will certainly complicate our plans."

"And the figure?" asked Scout, ignoring the remarks. "I thought we knew everything that was to happen. We certainly didn't expect its presence."

"Yes, something about all of this eludes me," Cellach said, lifting his hand to silence the onslaught of questions. "Rest assured I will look into where our information went wrong. But,

first, we need to attend to the plan at hand. If Hale is the boy's father then we have less time to act than I thought."

He lifted the boy from the ledge of the sphere's base control and cradled him in his arms. Range wedged his way as close as he could to Cellach and the plinth.

"This might be uncomfortable little one, but no harm will come to you," Cellach whispered to the child.

He then placed the child into the gel of the sphere's console. The boy screamed. Range's fur stood on end.

The crying continued as the boy descended into the film, its mass covering his body. The child sank until the gel filled his ears, nose and mouth, bringing silence to the room. Range let out a spine-tingling howl that echoed throughout the chamber. The other skuhies joined in and the room was filled with their distinctive solemn hymn. Above the group, the sphere spun slightly on its vertical axis and a light blinked from a point in the Rual Mountains before emitting a cubed projection, containing an outline of the boy's body plus various charts and graphs that measured his vitals.

"Rest assured, he is the child," Cellach said, pointing to a particular chart in the cube. "See the reading on the agents in his blood."

He punched a combination of the twelve symbols that rested in the perimeter of the liquid. Two three-dimensional rectangles

appeared next to the boy's cube, both containing the outline of men and more charts and graphs, although most of the charts appeared to be inactive.

Range's hearing picked up the hum of the many simultaneous projections. As the outlines became clear, the first read--Feraj, Deceased--and the second read--Hale, Deceased. But Cellach did not focus on the differences that appeared on the projections. He instead pointed to their similarities.

"See, the agents of Feraj and Hale--father and son--are the same," said Cellach. "These are not found in our world, but only in the world of Feraj. The boy is their heir, Feraj's grandson."

Cellach reached back over the liquid and tapped another sequence of symbols. At once, the outline of Hale disappeared and the Epochsphere spun a complete circle on its axis, steady and deliberate, until it stopped again at the point where it had started--the Rual Mountains. The boy's likeness originated from this location.

Feraj's projection remained, as well, but when Range looked for its destination it led back to no known point on the orb. Its light sprung from a sharp green question mark that rested just West of Inspa. That's in the Falan Sea, Range thought. But before he could ask the scholars what it meant, the faint green outline of Feraj began to speak.

"At the height of peril, a child of my blood, but one of the Cirri twelve, will return to you. This child will lift you from darkness and will be the savior of this world. You shall call him Mith. From his ignorance you will find salvation. He will uncover the Adamas AxinE, galvanize the resistance and raise an unparalleled army of protectors. He is hope's hero."

The image of Feraj disappeared and they remained silent for several moments, the only sound the residual crackle from Feraj's faded outline.

"The Adamas AxinE, the true diamond hand axes--the same that have the power of adsorption," Range asked.

"The same," Piran said.

Range wished he were so lucky to be able to deflect anything that came his way; the responsibility with Mith would be a great place to start. But the whispers again called and he remembered his duty. Protect. Defend. Care.

Cellach reached into the base of the Epochsphere and lifted the child out of the mass of green gel, slowly turning him over and reswaddling him in his original blanket. Strangely, no residue covered the child.

"What are we to do now?" Asked Elias. "The boy's mother is dead. He cannot possibly make the journey."

"Well he can't stay here!" Piran exclaimed.

"Piran's right. The boy is not safe here," Cellach said.

"What about Visserrell?" Scout asked.

"Yes, Visserrell! The King's daughter Violet is returning home. If it's safe enough for her?" Elias said.

"No," Cellach said firmly. "The bond of honor has been broken--the Wardens, despite all of the King's hopes, are not aligned. Mith would certainly come in harm's way in Visserrell. In fact, there's no place in this world where he would be safe. We continue with the original plan and take him to Lord Janus."

Cellach tapped several of the symbols in the gel pool and pointed to a blinking light on the Epochsphere. "Here. We can rendezvous in the Nimbi Valley. It appears Janus will only be there a short time."

"But you know the valley's dangers," Piran said. He stepped forward, gave Range a hard glare and then lowered his voice.

No matter. Range heard every word.

"Besides, look at the other lights in the area," Piran whispered. "Sundu."

"Yes. I see your point," Cellach said. "The Cirri should help protect him, but let me check something."

Cellach hit another combination of symbols. The Epochsphere spun on its axis and the light that represented Lord Janus' location jumped to another spot on the sphere. This time, it was half way around the world from Genizah. Cellach continued, hitting a succession of several different combinations, and with

each option some obstacle stood in the way: Lord Janus would be no closer than the Nimbi Valley and, even if he were, the Sundu awaited at every Portrans destination.

Cellach sighed and then announced so everyone heard him. "The Nimbi Valley it is. We do not know when Lord Janus will return so close again."

"Who will take the boy?" Tilt asked. "I'm ready."

Just like Tilt, Range thought, for him to eagerly volunteer for the most dangerous mission any of them had undertaken. Every Sundu in the world would be looking for this child.

"Stealth above all else will determine success. Only one of you will accompany the boy to meet Lord Janus. Range, I believe?"

Range concentrated on Cellach, who looked at Piran and Elias for approval. He gulped. His usually wet nose and mouth were dry.

Both scholars confirmed Cellach's choice with a slight nod. Range looked at the infant, no more than a few weeks old, and recounted the magnitude of this responsibility. The boy's determined pewter eyes stared back at him and for a fleeting moment, he felt assured. But seeing the dimpled cheeks in which they were set reminded him the boy was far from growing into those eyes. Mith was every bit as small and fragile as he appeared. How would he be able to care for him, let alone

protect him if they were attacked? He had no knowledge of such caretaking skills.

"Range will take him to meet Lord Janus," Cellach said, placing his hand on the Skuhy's shoulder and then turning to face him. "Range, do you understand your assignment?"

"Sir, I am not ready for this responsibility," Range barked out.

Scout stepped forward, his limp from the rescue still pronounced. "I will take him then."

"That is very brave of you, Scout, but we need you to remain behind with us. There are other preparations to make. Range will go."

"But there is so much for me to learn," Range said, avoiding eye contact and his tail curling below his belly.

"Range, your knowledge in that regard is precisely why you are going," Cellach concluded. "It's decided. Scout, Durham and Tilt, thank you. Applaud yourselves for getting Mith here. Range, please stay behind so we may finish your preparations."

As Cellach dismissed the other Skuhies, Mith broke out into a lip-curling cry. Cellach's knuckle didn't provide comfort, nor did any other uninformed method of soothing a child that the scholars and Range could think up.

After several more minutes, Range was panting rapidly. Frustrated, he said to no one, "What preparations will ready me for that?"