

Chapter 3 - The Sundu

Gabriel awoke belly-down on a soft bed in a neat, but unadorned room. The sheets were clean, giving off a floral scent, but like his lower back they felt stiff. He started to turn onto his back and felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a familiar voice said.

Gabriel didn't move but heard footsteps. Macallan knelt eye level with him. The deep lines in the sage Warden's face showed his age, but his long red hair, no grey streaks visible and pulled into a ponytail, belied it. To match his mane, Macallan's rust-colored beard trailed just above the dragon's crest blazoned into his azure gelmail.

"Macallan, I'm glad to see you."

"An' I'm glad to see you kid..." returned Macallan, a slight smile forming. "Alive anyway. You lost a lot of blood and you're lucky to still be with us. Next time, don't try an' take on a whole battalion alone, eh?"

"Yes...but...is the girl safe? Did you see the eyes of those people... are you upset with-?"

Macallan laughed at the last question. "Enough questions already—one at a time. You're going to be here a while, I'll get to them all, but to the important items first. The girl is safe and you're a hero, my dear boy. You don't remember who the girl is, do you?"

"No. Her gown hinted she is of noble birth, but—"

"Well, let's just say that once you're out of bed, you'll find that your act overshadowed the succession celebration. The girl you saved was the Duke's niece—"

Gabriel started to jump in, missing the significance, but Macallan raised a hand, signifying he should be allowed to finish. "Gabriel...the King's daughter."

Gabriel started to question again, but Macallan silenced him. "So, you can see that I'm not angry with you. You arrived just before any real crime was committed against the princess. She was only bruised, and a little shaken, but who knows what would have happened had you not arrived when you did."

Gabriel was finally able to cut in, remaining incredulous over whom he'd rescued. "That was Violet, the King's only daughter?"

"Yes. She has asked to visit, so she can thank you. I have refused her thus far and will continue to do so until I feel you're strong enough to have visitors; although, I did spy her slipping out of here the day before yesterday. Bless she's meddling! You would think the girl would learn from the skirmish in the courtyard."

"She snuck in here?"

"Yes, but graver matters are now upon us, so I need you to get healthy soon. And focused. The attackers you asked about, what did you say about their eyes?"

Gabriel described to Macallan the strange eyes of his attacker: the black ring and the dark vertical bars that cut through the pupil.

"Sundu," Macallan said.

"The Sundu?"

"Yes, an ancient people West of the Ruuls who were once bent on finding a prophesized gateway to salvation. They believed this world was damned and that keys existed that would lead them to a Holy Land in another world.

"Legends say that the Sundu believed that the royal families had possession of the keys to the gateway, or Union as it is commonly called, so several plots against the King's family and other noble families were made centuries ago."

Gabriel had heard stories of the Union before, but he recalled no one had really ever seen it or could verify its existence.

"The Sundu," Macallan continued, "travel in large packs, with a Supreme Alpha, who is unusually strong in dark magic. The eyes of a Sundu follower render the mark when the Alpha is near."

Though he listened to Macallan, Gabriel remained focused on what he had said about the Union. "What are these keys you referred to?"

"The diamond of a Cirri child. Why do you ask?"

The mark itself frightened him and Gabriel recalled his initial shock at its first appearance. But more disturbing was the knowledge that a greater evil lurked close by, an evil trying to get at the princess and her stone. "Violet told me in the courtyard that they were after her stone."

"But it has to be mistake," Macallan murmured. He ran a hand through the lock's of his untrimmed beard. "The Sundu have been dead for decades. Are you sure this is what you saw?"

"Yes."

"Then I imagine the attack you stopped was the closest to succeed of any attempts on record--against the King's family anyway."

There was a knock at the door. Macallan stood from the bed and went to the door. Gabriel faced the opposite direction and heard Macallan greet the guest with a polite "hello."

He contemplated rolling over. But his back shook when lifting his head for a better listen, so he thought better of it. Macallan and the guest exchanged a few inaudible words before he finally heard reluctant creek of the hinges and Macallan say, "all right then. Come in."

Macallan walked over to Gabriel and knelt again to face him. "I'm off for a few minutes. Don't strain yourself while I'm gone."

Gabriel smiled when he saw the young princess pull a chair to the side of his bed. Her long bistre-brown hair and fine ink-colored eyebrows framed sparkling blue eyes that the clearest of summer's days would envy. Gabriel started to pull closer to her, but Violet motioned him to lie still.

"Macallan made me promise," she said, pressing a finger to his lips so he could not argue. "I'm sorry you missed the celebration. I was really looking forward to thanking you then."

"Was it exciting?" asked Gabriel.

"There was plenty going on if that's what you mean. Once I found out you were hurt, I wasn't much in the mood for celebrating."

"Oh..." Gabriel offered, embarrassed.

"Do you know how long before you will be up and around?"

"No idea. I only woke today that I can remember. How many days have I been here?"

"Today's the second day. You had no idea?"

Gabriel reached behind his torso and fingered the bandage wrapped around his waist. The puffy gauze stuck to his hand, so he stopped and brought it back around. A mild residue stuck to his fingers and he rubbed his thumb to them, hoping to wipe it away. "No. I must've lost more blood than I realized."

Violet's toes tapped against the floor. Her gaze followed. "Well, I do hope you're up soon because I will be returning to Visserrell shortly. And I would like to see you before I go. I don't want to bother you when you're not well."

"Oh, you're no bother," he said, disappointed to hear she would be leaving soon. Yet based on his discussion with Macallan, he understood why.

Violet brought her glance back to face Gabriel and smiled sheepishly. He could feel the warm blood course to his cheeks as they stretched into a return grin. The room fell silent. Violet's beauty could lift the fog from even the dreariest moor. An elegant neck led to an even more exquisite face. Her broad smile accentuated her wide, full lips and her slender nose. Quit dreaming, Gabriel, he thought. She would be leaving soon, probably before he was even up and around. He could not stare at her forever, but he could not tolerate the quiet any longer either.

"So, who will succeed your father as King?"

"It's Sir Walter. You didn't know?" she said, her face scrunching up in disbelief. "I thought with Macallan here you would have known that he would be named."

Gabriel shrugged. "I'd guessed, but--"

"Well, even I knew and normally my father doesn't tell me anything."

The conversation stopped there as Macallan returned to the room. His posture sagged and he rubbed his eyes with his palms, obviously something troubled him.

Sensing the awkwardness, Violet leaned forward and kissed Gabriel on the cheek. "I'll be leaving now, but I would like to see you again before I leave. Assuming that would be all right with you, of course."

Gabriel's voice cracked. "It...would."

She let her hand trace down his shoulder and walked off. As she exited the room, the pitter-patter of her feet was replaced with the clunks of Macallan's boots. Macallan paced at the foot of Gabriel's bed for several moments before he spoke.

"I don't know how to say this—"

Macallan returned to his silence and the pacing. Both of which, along with the dull pain in his back and Violet's departure, annoyed Gabriel.

"Say what?" Gabriel said, more boldly than usual.

His directness snapped Macallan back to attention. His mentor walked around the foot of the bed to face him. Macallan knelt down. As their eyes met, Gabriel saw what he had never seen there before: Fear. Macallan feared nothing.

"Gabriel, Sir Walter shared a King's message with me just now. Confirmation has come from all of the royal families. The attack you stopped the other day was not the only one," Macallan said looking to the floor, his head languid. "Reports of attacks

are coming in from several townships. Some lay in ruin—nothing left but twisted metal and smoldering rock.”

A long silence followed Macallan’s fateful announcement. Finally, he forced himself from his crouch to straddle the chair where Violet had sat just minutes before. “The Cirri children have been attacked, kidnapped...murdered,” he muttered.

Gabriel's disbelief still registering, a thought bristled in his mind. “I don’t understand. Aren’t Cirri children able to see the future? Wouldn’t they have been able to see this coming?”

The chair legs screeched against the slate floor as Macallan slid closer to him. Macallan wiped his face with his hands and spoke in a low voice.

“Possibly. But many times they cast their dreams to each other. So it's like picking shards of glass from gravel. When the vision involves them, they have a difficult time distinguishing between fact and fiction.”

Pulling out of a fantasy ailed Gabriel, as well. The events of the past few days fluttered through his mind like a deck of shuffling cards. This included Violet being thrust into his life.

“...what will become of her?” he asked.

Macallan turned to him. “Who? Violet?” he asked, his face twisted in a puzzled look.

Gabriel said nothing.

"I can't ever recall you asking about a girl," he said, chuckling. But then his expression grew stern. "Rescue or not, Gabriel, you need to understand that Violet is no ordinary girl. She's the King's daughter."

Blood rushed to his face. His ears throbbed and he could feel the heat underneath his skin. Macallan had never set limits with him before. Incensed, he replied between ground teeth. "Why would you say that?"

Contemplating Macallan's words, he closed his eyes and thought of Violet. The floral accents of her perfume still lingered.

He found her confidence and penchant for adventure attractive. She'd pushed past Macallan to see him, hadn't she? If she were in his situation now, she'd probably tell Macallan to go--something he couldn't bring himself to do.

Macallan moved from the chair to sit on the edge of Gabriel's bed, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Don't be upset. The events of the last few days have triggered uncertain times and the King will do everything in his power to protect her. If you have affections for the girl and think this is about your status. It's not. I trust your judgement, I would just tell you to tread lightly."

Tread lightly. Right. Macallan's words crunched him like a boot heel smashing a bug. He flipped on his side away from Macallan. The patch on his back pulled and a grimace of pain stretched across his face. In the corner, his nicked and dented

armor lay scraped and covered in dried blood and mud. He would never get it clean. A pained chortle broke from his lips. Its filth was a perfect metaphor for the moment.

"What's so funny?" asked Macallan.

"Nothing," said Gabriel.

Like the armor, no matter how Macallan polished the sentiments of his words, the grimy truth could not be washed away: This was about status.

Gabriel was certain of it. He wasn't positive Violet found him attractive, but even if she did, it appeared to be a mute point. A relationship with the princess was hopeless.

There was another knock. "Hello. May I come in?" a woman's voice called.

Gabriel recognized it as nurse's. Macallan greeted the woman, and returned to Gabriel's bedside, breaking his view of the armor.

"I am due to meet with Sir Walter again, but will return once I'm finished," he said to Gabriel. He turned to the nurse before leaving the room. "I suppose there's little you can do for his attitude."

Gabriel wasn't concerned about adjusting his attitude. And if he were, his nurse wouldn't be the individual to correct it. He thought her name was Sadie and she was old enough to be his grandmother, maybe even his great grandmother. A head full of blinding white hair and a wrinkled face bobbed atop a set of vestigial limbs. Yet even with her fragile appearance, there was

a spryness about her gait and a grace in her overall posture. He followed the movement of her gaze and surmised that she was studying the room and him.

"How are you feeling, Gabriel?" she asked in a soothing tone.

With a groan, he pulled himself into a sitting position. "I'm okay, but I'm tired of this bed."

Sadie placed her hand under his shoulder to assist. "That's a good sign. Some of your strength is returning. I need to check your patch."

She nudged one of his shoulders. Gabriel sunk into his pillows and rolled his body, giving her access to the gel patch that was mending his wound. He stared at his bedside table. Resting on the it was the knife that was the cause of all of this effort. Macallan told him he should keep such an artifact to remind him of his mortality.

The ointment's heavy mint smell used to keep the gel patch moist made demands of his attention. Sadie applied it around the edges of the patch and its pasty texture sent a chill up Gabriel's spine.

"Ms. Sadie? That's correct, isn't it?" asked Gabriel. He had the worst time remembering people's names.

"Yes, dear, that's correct."

"How close was I to death?" Gabriel looked upon the knife again and imagined the twisting motion with which it was thrust

into his back. He imagined the tearing sounds as the blade ripped through his lumbar muscles.

"I'm not sure I understand your meaning, dear."

"How far was the blade from my spine? How lucky am I to be alive?"

"Very lucky. If not your life then your ability to walk, at least. The blade missed your spinal cord by half an inch."

"That close?"

"Yes, dear, but your surviving does not surprise me. You have the unique ability to escape death. By all accounts, you should have never been born."

With those words, Gabriel rolled to face the nurse. "What do you know of my birth?"

"Not that much," Sadie said, smiling slyly. "I was only one of the attending nurses. Dear say, seems I am the lone remaining person alive that was present at your birth."

Gabriel was aghast. He had never met anyone who remembered what his mother looked like, much less interacted with her. Lost in his thoughts, he watched as he pulled at the corner of his pillowcase.

His father was even more of a mystery. From the bits and pieces he had been able to string together over the years, his father hadn't even arrived in Adon for his birth. He was born a bastard.

"Years ago, before I became Macallan's squire. I scoured the castle. Interviewed many people looking for answers about my parents. Surely you heard about my search."

She continued massaging in the ointment. "I did."

"Then why did you not come forward?"

"You are asking all the right questions, dear. You are as bright as Macallan lets on," Sadie said.

She picked up the porcelain pitcher and poured a glass of water. Her hands shook as she drank. "I don't fear death as I once did. I imagine that Sir Walter has let me attend to you as some sort of leverage, anticipating I would reveal some truth to you. As much as I know anyway."

Not much of this made any sense to Gabriel. People were dying because they had information about his birth. Had Macallan been keeping information from him?

A feeling of betrayal swept over him. "What truth?" asked Gabriel. "Has Macallan known all these years?"

"No dear," she said. "I need to speak plainly and be very clear. Only two people alive--to my knowledge--are aware of the actual events the day of your birth: me and Sir Walter."

The tension in Gabriel's shoulders relaxed. At least his faith in Macallan had been restored. "Not even the Constable?"

"Not even the Constable. Now what other question did you ask?"

"I wondered why no one sent me to you for answers."

She considered his question. "Oh yes...Because we concealed the truth," she said flatly. "I was approached by your former caretaker once. He told me he couldn't stop your incessant questioning and figured the nurses could shut you up. But I told him I knew nothing," she said, then interjected. "Lovely man --"

"What do you know of my mother?" asked Gabriel, interrupting the nurse.

He couldn't wait any longer. His entire life at Adon had been spent searching for answers about his origins. Without it, he felt incomplete, unknown to himself.

Sadie pouted, looking a little hurt about being required to change topic, but she continued as directed. "Your mother arrived here alone on horseback the day of your birth. Her presence caused quite a stir."

"Yes. Yes. But how did she die?"

She peered around the room. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Your mother died just moments after giving birth to you, but her death was not of natural causes. She had been poisoned. It was a miracle you lived. By all accounts the poison should have killed you, too."

"Poisoned! How? What kind of poison?"

"It was the poison of a reptulus."

Only the strong--or the blessed--could ward off the effects of reptuli poison. Was it possible his mother had sacrificed her life for his?

"What was she like?"

"You remember I said that your mother was quite a sight..." she said, pausing to take another drink of water from her glass. "Oh...I know no better way than to tell you directly. She was a Sundu."

It was suddenly as if he had been poisoned. The news was worse than any he could have expected. Anything but a Sundu, he thought. Does that mean I'm a Sundu? His heartbeat quickened. A thin layer of sweat laced every pore of his skin. What would Macallan think? His racing mind finally landed on a redemptive thought. "Did she...sacrifice herself for me or was it a miracle?" he asked, sputtering.

"I don't really know, dear, but I have the best of educated guesses. Your mother fought through the courtyard and the castle, besting several men to give birth to you. By all accounts she was lucky to make it to labor. And even after you survived combat, poison, and delivery, you had to endure a great debate. Your life hung in the balance. Most of the nurses wanted to kill you straight away. You have Sir Walter to thank for sparing your life. He believes you were born with a great destiny in mind."

#

Two black-cloaked riders stormed toward Adon's castle. Elizabeth, in the lead, admired the picturesque quality of Adon.

She soaked up the call of the surrounding Ebon forest, with its gurgling brooks and rustling aspen trees. In her mind, the titanium structure nestled in the grandeur of the centuries old forest represented the finest blend of history and advancement.

Once they reached the massive gates, the guards let them pass freely. She dismounted her horse, floating from her saddle and touching the rich soil below her feet. Pulling back her hood and wiping the strands of fine raven-colored hair from her face, she transferred her thoughts to Sawn, her apprentice. "I'm already late for the meeting. Let her know we'll be returning home in a few days."

Elizabeth passed her horses' reins to a stable hand and moved with purpose through the castle courtyard.

"What about the other children? Do you want to say anything?" Sawn asked.

Her pace slowed. "You can tell her what you know," she called and then continued her stride through the courtyard thinking, what little you know.

Normally, she would have drifted through the corridors of the castle and reveled in its magnificence, but today, she hustled through walkways and up staircases, finally reaching Sir Walter's private chamber.

A menacing guard lifted his hand and moved forward to verify her credentials. She peeled off an opera-length leather glove and reached under the folds of her black cloak. The guard's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I have papers," she muttered.

The guard nodded, signaling to continue. "Please then."

Slowly, she withdrew a parchment with the King's seal and extended it to the guard. The red wax with a Warden donning a quartered charge of interchanging cross and phoenix glinted in the castle's candlelight. He reached for the parchment without realizing the fingertip of his gelmail armor had opened slightly. Elizabeth shook with anticipation.

The guard collected the document. As he pulled it back, his bare fingertip brushed her hand. He crumpled to the slate floor with a dense smack.

She hesitated a moment. "How dare you question me," she said. Enjoying her retribution, she then dropped the parchment on the guard's chest before thrusting open the doors.

#

Violet raced from Gabriel's room, down the hall, and up the spiral staircase to her chamber. The guard standing outside her room held out a hand. "Miss, is everything--"

But she brushed past before he could finish his thought.

Slamming the door shut behind her, she entered her room and plopped on the bed, giddy. There was good reason to capture this moment.

She slid open the table drawer, removed her journal, and rolled toward the center of the bed, feet dangling over the

side. Elbows buried in the bed's down quilt, she scribbled in her journal:

Who is that man?

With a strong draft in the room, she stopped writing to pull the covers over her. She wrote:

Who is that man who rescued me?

The down quilt shook free once again and the air bit into her, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. She pulled the covers tight around her shoulders. The thought of Gabriel's sincerity enveloped her like the quilt's warmth.

Who is that man who rescued me? He is fair, in both looks and temperament. A rare genuiness resides in him, yet I've also noticed an aloofness that I cannot describe. He exudes warmth, but does he care anything for me?

Am I selfish? He hardly knows me.

I can't help but wonder. He's handsome: Beautiful topaz eyes and built like the most celebrated of spires. And bright, yet not boastful. Most of the men so blessed are arrogant. I do hope his attention will extend beyond his act of bravery.

I've asked about him all over the castle. But people are hesitant to tell me anything other than he is Macallan's squire. Why the mystery?

And yet I expose myself to heartache again, finding myself attracted to another keeper of the peace.

She stopped writing, bit the end of her pen, and considered the other flaws typical of a Warden. The common one was their

customary lack of humor, though few could be faulted for not showing this trait during the tumult of the last several days. She returned to scribbling:

Why I am succumbing to this illusion? It's not as if Wardens make the best companions. Generally, they're ill-humored chaps focused only on duty. It consumes them.

But he is not on the front lines. He is only a squire. But if his show of his skill is any indication, he will become a Warden Tyro and where will that put him? Right where I don't want him, that's where. Boys do grow up to be men- ill-humored men concerned only about duty, their arms stretched beyond the capacity of the pumping heart. As a result, their hands are steely with resolve, determined with responsibility.

And by the brave act he performed the other day, I imagine this is his destiny, as well. I'll be cursed, with constant afflictions of the heart.

Speaking of my wounds, my real ones are minor and healing nicely. Ironically, I have the drunken bystanders to thank as much as Gabriel for rescuing me. Had they not stumbled upon me and caused such a ruckus, no one would have been alerted to my danger. Wretched Sundu would have slid out of the castle grounds with me!

"As they did with the others," escaped her lips.

She touched the locket hanging on her neck. After her accident, she'd had her Cirri diamond infused in the platinum

centerpiece. She caressed the walnut-sized stone with the tip of her index finger. Horrific visions filled her mind: exploding rock of revered castle walls and singed metal trapped a mass of screaming people. Tanned women and men, their expressions stony and bodies draped in black cloaks, carried her Cirri siblings out of the carnage.

The last image was a single gold thread amid a fabric of darkness. A newborn had been rescued. There had been two recent additions to the Cirri order and Violet could not discern whether Illyana's unnamed infant son or Toban, the young duke of Dandion, had escaped.

Though they rarely met, all Cirri children formed a strong kinship with the others. She flipped the diamond over in her palm and picked at the broken shard where the stone had been severed from her navel. This recent tragedy fortified her bond with the others, but it also furthered her suspicions that being a member of the Cirri clan was nothing more than a curse.

Violet was finishing up her journal entry when she heard a knock at the door. The guard watching her door stepped into the room. Another guard sat outside her window. After the attack, precautions to ensure her safety were everywhere.

The guard bowed. Violet noticed how natural the guard's motion appeared in his new gelmail, the silver tissue of the armor glistening in the castle light. "A Miss Sawn to see you, mylady."

"Please welcome her in."

She closed her journal and caressed the cover. "I'll be back. I promise."

After setting the it aside, she looked over her shoulder, smiling as her best friend, in all her beauty, entered the chamber. Sawn's long cocoa hair almost concealed her natural olive skin and its graceful features. Violet rolled out of bed and embraced her friend.

"What news from Visserell?"

"Well...the Wardens are organizing for the first time since the Sundu Crusades. There was also talk of what to do with you, whether it was better to leave you here or have you return home. You are okay, I gather?"

"Just a bruise here and there," she said, running a hand down one of her arms. "I'm still shaken, though, by how easy it was for them to reach me."

"That's why your father made the decision for you to return home. He can direct all of his attention to keeping you safe."

"I hope my uncle won't take offense."

"I'm sure the greatest of his concerns is your safety."

Violet could believe as much. Her uncle, Sir Walter, loved her and probably cared little for pretense right now.

Discussion of safety led her thoughts to linger on the other Cirri children. Sawn might be just the person to ask about the attacks.

"I've been able to gather little information about the other children. What happened to them?"

"The details are sketchy. I'm not certain how many of the kidnappings were successful. I suspect Elizabeth knows a great deal more and reveals little to me because of our relationship. I know that we are to escort you home. Other than that, all I know is that the Wardens are being called to arms."

Violet wondered whether it truly would be safer to return home. Plus there was the matter of Gabriel. "Must I return home?"

Sawn chuckled, anticipating her friend's response. "I had a feeling you wouldn't appreciate being under your father's watchful eye, Sundu or no Sundu."

"It's not that. I've met a certain boy."

Sawn's brow furrowed, obviously curious. "Do tell. Is that why you were in the courtyard? I couldn't figure out why you were--"

"No. But it's because I was in the courtyard that day that I met him."

"I'm confused. You couldn't mean--" Sawn's eyes widened in acknowledgement.

"That's right. He's amazing--handsome, intelligent, brave."

Sawn's arms splayed out in front of her. "Yes. He's everything you need him to be, except..."

"Except what?"

Sawn gave her that look, half-condescending, half-pitying. "Violet, he's not of noble birth."

"How can that be? He is one of Macallan's squires, isn't he?"

"Yes, but it is possible for an appointment to be made of someone who is not of noble birth. The Warden himself has to petition to make it happen. Gabriel is the rare example."

It felt as if a thousand vises gripped at her heart. She hadn't given even fleeting consideration to Gabriel not being of noble birth. "Is there any chance of him attaining nobility?"

"None that I'm aware of. Violet, it might be in your best interest to drop this. You know your father will never allow it. Does Gabriel reciprocate your feelings?"

A good point. Without understanding Gabriel's feelings, the relevance of her anxiety carried about as weight as a whisper over a waterfall. "I don't know."

#

"Now, about Gabriel--" Sir Walter started, but he never had the opportunity to finish his statement. The chamber doors swung open. The Duke of Adon stopped his conversation with Macallan and rose to greet his guest. "Ahhh, at last! We've been awaiting your arrival."

A woman dressed in a black cloak stepped into the room. Macallan recognized the King's high priestess, her pale face, raven hair, and hazel eyes. Her arrival agitated Sir Walter's hawk, which pranced side-to-side about its perch.

"It's been a long journey. I'm sorry I couldn't be here sooner."

Macallan stepped forward and extended his hand. Her presence indicated recent events were as tragic as he had feared. The corners of her sharp eyes crinkled and she raised her gloved hand to embrace his.

"Elizabeth... Good to see you after so many years. Sir Walter has told me a great deal about your recent work. I look forward to hearin' more about your efforts."

"The honor should be all mine. Tales of your exploits extend further than the greatest of journeys. I also hear your apprentice shares your knack for the spectacular."

"Gabriel. Yes—"

But before Macallan could finish, Sir Walter motioned both to sit. "We must give some urgency to the somber matters at present. Elizabeth, what are the reports from around the kingdom?"

Elizabeth removed a parchment from her cloak, set it on the table, broke the seal and unrolled it. "Sire. Our worst fears are being realized. Several noble born children have either been killed or kidnapped from different provinces—ten in all..." she said, pausing to confirm details on the parchment. "...with seven confirmed dead. By all accounts, it appears the children are all Cirri nobles."

"You're sure...all Cirri children?" Macallan asked, shaking his head.

"Unfortunately, yes. And nearly all of the information about the attackers matches your description of Gabriel's account. From what we can tell, all twelve children were targeted. However, as you know, they were not successful in kidnapping Violet."

Elizabeth nodded her head in appreciation to Macallan and then continued. "The assailants also made an attempt on an infant boy from our lands near the Ruals, an orphan that the Genizah Elders call Mith. The Elders anticipated the attack and were able to thwart the attempt on the boy."

"Mith," Sir Walter huffed. His chest swelled as if he needed to gather his strength. "The savior of our world will be of noble birth but his blood not of this world.." Sir Walter rapped his fingers on the table as he spoke. "Yes, I know the Genizah prophecy, he snarled, frowning at Elizabeth first and then Macallan. "They believe this boy, recently born with a stone, that his father was from across the Union. Interesting."

Macallan paid no attention to the discussion of the boy. The mention of the Ruals and the boy's alleged father roused a void he had not felt nor desired to address in some time. "Hale was last seen in the Ruals," Macallan stated out loud to no one in particular.

The three sat quiet for a moment, the mood as taut and dense as tensile steel.

The subject of Hale and his death had been considered taboo by all three, all friends of the King's former Warden. Macallan

had been the closest friend to the oddworlder and son of Feraj, their world's greatest warlock.

"He is dead, his body found years ago," Elizabeth said.

"Yes. A body with striking similarities surfaced, but no one was ever able to prove that it was Hale. I hold out hope that he is still alive," Macallan said.

"I'm sorry Macallan," Sir Walter interrupted, folding his arms across his chest. "I can only address so many mysteries in a day, particularly when one is perpetuated by the wishful thinking of his closest friend. The identity of the boy's father is speculative, at best. Elizabeth, please continue with your report. Do you believe it was the Sundu?"

In his mind Macallan continued to dispute who else could have spawned the child. Hale was the only descent of Feraj, the only man not of their world.

"Difficult to tell. As you both know the Sundu have been dead for at least a generation. Their beliefs—and their influence—disappeared when they were vanquished. While I do believe these attacks were organized, I haven't seen or heard enough solid evidence to believe the Sundu have risen again."

"What are your forces doing in the meantime?" Sir Walter asked.

"I have a small group, specialists in the ancient Sundu, searching for confirmation they exist. The King has also asked I gather the Wardens to rescue the kidnapped children and find the stones. Most are already dispatched in the search."

"And if it is the Sundu?" Macallan asked.

"Then we have a lot to fear," said Elizabeth. "If they have the children, then it's possible that they have almost every stone needed to cross the Union. At the risk of sounding insensitive, while it would be important to find the children, it would be even more critical to retrieve the stones."

The popular legend was that a stone could not be separated from its child without causing certain death. But a select few, including all present, had knowledge of this theory's calamitous undoing. Violet was living proof. If Elizabeth's reports were right and several children lay dead, the Sundu in possession of their stones, it now appeared another theory had been debunked: the Cirri Diamonds could indeed live on without the child. There was much to fear.

Macallan pulled at the rust-colored strands of his beard. Elizabeth had presented the signs he hoped would never come to pass. It was time to make his sacrifice. "Elizabeth, I will help you find the children."

"Macallan, as always, the King thanks you for your service. But before we embark on the children's rescue mission, I am to escort Violet to Visserrell. I would also hope that you would be part of that escort."

Nothing could keep him from accompanying Violet. "I will."

"Now, I understand that in your youth you were credited for having killed one of the last Sundu holy leaders. Did you see anything to confirm what Gabriel reported?" Elizabeth asked.

"Gabriel described the mark of the Sundu, but I did not have a first-hand account of it."

Elizabeth slid her hands out on the mahogany table and her face stretched into a smug smile. "Have you ever shared stories of the Sundu with him in the past?"

Macallan didn't appreciate the insinuation about Gabriel's mother. "Certainly not what you're suggesting," he said. Macallan pulled at his beard again, making an effort to recollect any conversations of consequence he might have had with Gabriel about the order. "It's possible. I've come to admire the lad greatly and I've told him a number of stories, both fact and fiction. But, I have had my doubts about what he saw...he lost a lot of blood—"

"He is well now, I trust. I would like to speak with him if I may."

"He is, and you may."

"Elizabeth, wouldn't you also like to congratulate him?" Sir Walter probed.

"Yes. Yes. Congratulations are in order for Gabriel."

Macallan shifted his eyes from Sir Walter to Elizabeth, expecting one of them to explain the fuss over his understudy. Sir Walter stepped from the table and walked to the server. The hawk had now settled and curled its head into its chest, attempting to sleep.

He refilled his goblet before he spoke. "I made a request to the King to have Gabriel Wardened. The King has granted my

request," Sir Walter said. "I think if he hadn't, his people would have lynched him. By saving Violet--and considering the other attacks--he has become a hero to the people of Visserrell."

Macallan stared at Sir Walter in shock. Only a handful of commoners had ever attained the rank of Warden Tyro. He had dreamt of such a life for Gabriel, but never believed that he would reach it.

"You seem surprised, Macallan." Sir Walter said.

Before Macallan could respond a woozy guard charged through the doors into the chamber, an unopened parchment clenched in his hand. He sighed in relief when he saw Sir Walter was unharmed.

Sir Walter chuckled, "Up to your old tricks, Elizabeth?"

"Ahem...Yes...I forgot to mention that you might want to increase security," she said, packing up her documentation. "I think this would be the perfect time to visit Gabriel."