

TruthWeaver: A Tale of the Dark Crystal

by Raven Oak

CHAPTER ONE

When two of the Three Brothers set, darkness would enshroud the Deep Wood, leaving behind only the weak light of the Dying Sun. A sallow blue that never set, it would remain solitary a few brief hours until the many moons ascended, their fourteen faces sending silver trickles through the canopy. But while day still touched Thra, sunlight from three suns broke through the thick branches of the GenTak trees and poked into the deepest corners of the forest. Mottled plants opened their petals to the suns, their bright splashes of blues and reds taunting insects into stepping across their gaping mouths until the trap closed across their bodies.

They're trapped. Like the Matriarch. Like me.

Jael waited, as did his clan's leader, for the procession of Matriarch to make its way across the village to the sacred meeting place. The gelfling gathering brought the six other Matriarch to the Deep Wood for the first time in any history Jael could recall.

I miss the quiet. No longer was his village home to just under a hundred or so gelfling. Members of the Spriton Clan guarded the tents pitched to shelter the guests of the Deep Wood. Everywhere a youngling once played, another tent stood. Every tree Jael climbed to hide from the prying eyes of his clan's Matriarch, was now under watch as gelfling crowded around the meeting place. *Waiting for a decision. For our future to be told. If the decision is made, more gelfling will come. Soon the forest will fill with thousands of gelfling.*

The Matriarch of his own Woodland Clan stood beneath a canopy of moss hanging from low branches. While she smiled, Jael noted how Mara's stiff shoulders forced her height to appear a smidge taller than her usual three feet. A shadow crossed his view as another gelfling stopped to watch the procession, and Jael scowled before moving from the comfort of his seat on a rock. His smaller than average arms pulled him up on a low hanging branch of a nearby tree, and he squatted along the creeping ivy whose deep green was hard to distinguish from the color of his own tunic.

Mara rested all four fingers against the face of the first clan leader in line, one Jael didn't recognize. *She must be from far away. Maybe the Dousan Clan from the Crystal Sea.* As both leaders closed their eyes, a brief gust of wind brushed the stranger's cloak, sending it shifting like particles of sand.

Whatever knowledge was shared in the dreamfasting, the corners of Mara's mouth tilted towards the forest floor before she schooled her face in a more neutral expression. The

other leader didn't speak out loud. Instead, her hands gestured like a flutter of light rain before she turned away, and the colors on her crystal-woven cloak shimmered. Jael gasped when her short frame all but disappeared beside the pale-tan flap. *Her cloak! That's the best camouflage I've ever seen. I know the Dousan are experts in hiding, but I had no idea. Imagine how easy it would be to hide within the forest with a cloak like that.*

Another clan leader took her place beside Mara, this one bearing the white hair and silver wings of the Vapra Clan. Another leader, another dreamfasting before she, too, stepped into the Grand GenTak that served as his clan's sacred meeting site.

For over an age, this tree served as the Matriarch's space, but never before had it housed the Matriarch of all seven gelfling clans, nor would it again. As his father had instructed, Jael studied each leader, but his inspection revealed no ulterior motive that he could see. Bored with the coming and goings of elders, Jael leaned back against the lichen-covered trunk. A worm inched its way across the branch in front of him, its hard, iridescent shell more purple than green in the waning light.

The Rose Sun has set, and soon the Greater Sun will join Him. Not much longer then until the meeting begins. When the last of the Matriarch ducked into the hollowed out tree, Jael swung down, paying careful mind not to squish the worm on his way to the ground.

Two guards stood before the hanging cloth door, and four steps from the entrance, one held out his hands to stop Jael. "And where do ya think yer goin', youngling?"

Jael's pointed ears twitched once. "I'm hardly a youngling anymore, Broen. Old enough to attend this meeting."

The guard shook his head. One inch taller than Jael's two-and-a-half foot frame, Broen tried to glance over the top of Jael's dark-haired head and failed, his eyes landing squarely on Jael's forehead. Jael laughed, and the older man scowled before digging his heels into the dried leaves of the forest floor. "None but the Matriarch enter today. Ya can attend the later meetin' when everyone's come to hear the decision."

"But by then it'll be too late!"

The guard's eyes narrowed. "Too late fer what, youngling? Just what information do ya think ya have that's important enough ta interrupt the Matriarch? Another one of yer tales?"

The Skeksis are our friends. They've done nothing wrong! Broen lifted his chin, his jaw clenched, and Jael knew he failed to hide the thoughts from his face.

"Why don't ya run off and find Nei? Surely you two have trouble to get inta 'way from here." Thick arms like tree branches crossed over a broad chest.

Little more than bullies the Spriton Clan are. Jael felt his nostrils flare in disgust at such a display of strength. *What need does a simple gelfling have of such brawn?*

Jael shot the guard a black look before retreating to the trunk of his earlier perch. Broen's eyes followed Jael, but the woven flap moved once to reveal a gelfling whose wobbling girth could rival the tree Jael leaned against, and Jael took the opportunity to duck behind another tent. His feet moved across the forest floor with purpose, though Jael tried to relax tense muscles as he twisted along one path and then another. To anyone watching, his path would appear to be the random trudge of a bored gelfling, but Jael's mind maneuvered him around the edge of the village in a lopsided circle until he curved around to the rear of the giant

GenTak tree. A weakening in the ancient trunk had left a rotted hole at its base, large enough for Jael to shimmy through if he held his breath.

I must hear this tale that concerns the Matriarch. We can't fight the Skeksis. Not on the word of one gelfling. There's no proof other than what he thinks he saw. He crouched down at the trunk and carefully swept away the gathered yellow leaves in front of the hole, doing his best not to make noises that would sound unnatural. When a leaf crackled too loudly, he didn't pause as a sneaking gelfling would do—but continued to move leaves in a slower motion as if wind carried them just outside the gathering. Jael sucked in a deep breath and flattened his belly to the dirt before wiggling through the crawlspace and into the sacred meeting room.

One way or another, I have to convince them that the Skeksis mean no harm. We cannot go to war.

Jael remained on his belly. He allowed his eyes to adjust to the dim light of a dozen torches, and his shoulder tried to cramp from the odd angle. When no one spoke or moved his way, he craned his head around to take in his surroundings. He lay at the rear of the hollowed out tree where extra chairs and tools were stored. In fact, a glance up revealed that Jael lay beneath a dark-wood table.

When he stood, he drew his cloak closer about his face, using the shadows to hide his light skin. The GenTak tree sheltered the seven gelfling leaders from the eyes and ears of the curious. *Though not me*, he thought with a wry grin. Jael didn't know when the giant tree was hollowed out, only that it was older than his father's father and marked with the histories of the Woodland Clan. Through magics he didn't understand, the tree continued to grow, never shedding its leaves even in the throes of winter. And yet the ground beneath its branches was

decorated in a soft layer of leaves, even at the height of spring. Its canopy stretched overhead, densely blocking out any of the fourteen moons that rose across the evening sky and cast light out across the Dark Wood.

Here was the place of decisions. Here was the place of secrets.

Jael tugged his cloak tighter. Even protected from the wind, the smooth trunk at his back chilled him, and the clattering of branches against each other from the boughs high above unnerved him in the darkness.

"We've all seen the signs that our world is not what it once was," said Rian after clearing his throat, and Mara's mouth turned down at its corners. "When was the last time you saw a tree grow in Skarith? The plains around the Castle of the Crystal are rotting away like the Swamp of Sog and the Fen of Ever-Living Trees. Putrid and barren, soon it will spread to this forest and beyond."

That doesn't mean the Skeksis are behind it. When a finger tapped the top of his hood, he bit his tongue to keep from crying out. He tilted his head to the left just enough for his brown eyes to spot the gelfling landing next to him in silence. "What are you doing here?" he hissed.

Nei stepped forward two steps too close to the torch light surrounding the gelfling clan leaders, and Jael pulled her back into the shadows. "I wasn't going to interrupt. I just wanted to better see," she answered. "Now hush, Rian is about to tell the rest of the clans what he saw."

What he thinks he saw. Her eyes widened in fascination, whereas he knew he wore a scowl in the darkness. It wasn't that he thought Rian a liar, but something wasn't right about his

story. Who could possibly believe a tale so...so wild! Not even I could weave together a yarn like that!

"The Woodland and Spriton Clans rest closer to the castle than the rest. Surely you know I speak the truth about the slow death of our lands?" When no one answered him, Rian scraped a hand through his closely-shorn hair as he paced the short length between the circle of seated Matriarch.

"The gelfling who guard the castle never set foot beyond the outer corridors, so how is it that you found yourself deep within the castle and in the laboratory of the Scientist, skekTek?" another Matriarch asked. Rian's face flushed red enough to clash against his green mottled tunic.

"By complete accident, I assure you. While following a giant-horned snail near the Green River, it crawled into a system of sewer tunnels to escape me. At first, I thought it nothing more than a cave, but when the maze of stalagmites shifted into dark, smooth walls, I knew I'd entered the castle proper. I-I was curious, though part of me wishes I hadn't been. If I could unsee what I have seen...." When Rian trailed off, his skin paled, and his blank eyes searched for something out of sight. Nei's chest ceased its normal rise and fall as she leaned forward again, her lips thin lines.

"Rian, please repeat to the other Matriarch what you told me. They must know of the betrayal," said Mara, leader of the Woodland Clan.

The gelfling bobbed his head up and down, and the water in his cup sloshed over the sides, watering the floor made of the GenTak tree's exposed roots. Rian took a slow sip before continuing. "The lab--I thought at first it was the great lab of the urSkeks, where they created

the wonderful tools that they shared with us so long ago--but the lab held cages of creatures--some alive, others dead. Some neither."

The fat Matriarch of the Drenchen Clan bent her neck forward as she dropped both hands into her lap where they played with the trim of her tunic. "How can they be neither? They're either alive or dead."

He continued without answering. "Foreign symbols were carved into three walls of solid crystal. The fourth wall held an opening with mirrors and shadows. After I dragged my eyes from the darkness of the walls, I saw it. In the center of the room. This table that drank the life from the living. Straps to hold creatures in place, and tubes to carry fluids from the body."

Nei reached for Jael's hand in the dark and squeezed it. *His description is accurate. Father was right.* A growing tension took root in the pit of Jael's stomach.

"How did you know what the machine did?" Another Matriarch asked, her pointed ears twitching.

"I'm getting to that," Rian muttered. "I heard a scuffling and hid amongst the baskets in a corner. The Skeksis--they did something to the podlings--" A hand clamped down on Jael's shoulder, and this time, both Nei and he cried out.

"Got ya." A gruff voice hissed in Jael's ear.

Broen's hand clenched Jael's hood, and he squirmed under the firm grip. Jael's gaze slid from the guard to the silence across the room where Mara's hard expression made him lose two inches of height.

"Sorry fer the interruption, Matriarch. I'll remove these two over-curious children."

He makes us out to be little more than babes. Jael tried to shrug it off, but the way Nei stared at the tree-rooted floor made him shrink in on himself until he was more cloak than gelfling.

"Broen, a moment please," Mara said as she crossed the room. "I know why my daughter is here--she followed you, Jael, as she always does, but tell me. Why are *you* here?"

Wide ovals peered at him so intently that he fell into their depths. His father's face, then the Chamberlain's popped into view. He couldn't stop the rushing wave of thoughts that crowded at the edge of his mind, ready to leap into hers and speak his secrets. Jael ground his teeth and willed himself to step back. Her gasp at his audacity broke the spell a moment before her hand would have touched his cheek.

He ducked and jerked his cloak from Broen's clasp. There was no time to wriggle through the crawlspace. Instead, he dashed headlong for the entrance and brushed aside the flap with both hands.

He continued his flight until he reached the deeper forest itself--woods so thick he could lose himself in the trees and not be found. *A risk at night, but a necessary one.* Jael settled into the intersection of two branches. *Mara is convinced that war is the answer. I thought, if I could just talk with the Matriarch, they would listen to reason. But they believe Rian's tale. And they're afraid--the Matriarch are actually afraid!* Jael leaned back to watch the ninth moon begin its ascent into the dark sky. When the thought crept up on him, Jael started and almost fell from the tree branch. The plan unfolded before him, and for the first time all evening, he smiled.

If the gelfling won't see reason, maybe the Skeksis will.

CHAPTER TWO

With the setting of the tenth moon and twilight a few hours off, Jael hid behind a tent to watch the Matriarch leave the meeting place. None of them stood tall or proud--their shoulders slumped and mouths drooped. Nei was nowhere in sight. Jael winced. *Probably at home. And in trouble.*

Once the GenTak stood empty, Jael moved through the shadows cast by the forest until he stepped through the flap of the sacred space. Smooth walls carved by gelfling hands for hundreds of trine stared back at Jael, the oldest shallower and almost smooth in its marking. Scenes of a time when the Three Brothers covered one another in the sky and the urSkeks still roamed Thra were followed by darker moments--the lands dried up, and the river turned black. The seas froze crystalline, and the urSkeks walked the land no more. TruthWeavers wove the

yarns in spirals up the trunk, and as Jael's eyes moved skyward, the pictures faded as branches splayed out in the upper bough.

You could weave our histories. Your tales are strong enough to hold the attention of the littles. His mother's voice whispered to him in rhythm to the clacking tree branches overhead, and he stood still, eyes closed and ears straining to listen. *I'd rather have my son grow old with the sharing of our yarns than traveling to the castle to guard a dying crystal.*

He echoed his younger self's gasp.

What? You didn't think I listened to the talks you have with your father? I hear more than you know. Be careful, Jael. For all that I love your father--

Footsteps outside brought Jael out of the memory. Nei ducked through the flap, and Jael finished his mother's sentence aloud. "I don't trust him."

Her ears twitched as she took in his change of clothing to a tunic and pants in deeper greens--clothes meant to blend in. To hide. "Don't trust who? Rian?"

"Never mind." He touched a hand to the carvings before him--a scene where the first Matriarch led the gelfling down from the mountains and into the Deep Wood to settle. *It must have been a simpler time...before we knew the dangers of Thra. Before we turned from Aughra to embrace the knowledge the urSkeks brought us.*

"My mother's less than happy with us for interrupting the meeting. I hope you have a good explanation for why you were spying." Hands on her hips, she awaited an answer. When he remained silent, she said, "You would have found out their decision soon enough, Jael. Spying on them was a bad idea, even if you don't trust Rian. If you ever want to be a TruthWeaver--"

"Don't." His sharp tone brought creases to the corners of her eyes. He tried to smile, but his forced grin more resembled a grimace.

"You're planning something, Jael. I can tell." She shook her head, dislodging her hood and revealing her butter-yellow hair to the single torchlight. Outside, several footfalls crossed near the entrance, and both gelfling remained still until the only remaining sound was the crackle of the torch.

He chuckled at her irritation, and this time, she poked a stern finger at his ribs. "Spill it, Jael."

When her pointed ears quivered, Jael saw her mother before him--pride and anger in her short stature. More laughter escaped his lips until he thought his sides would burst from the effort.

A flush charged across her cheeks. "If you don't tell me what you're planning, I'll go to my mother."

"No, you won't."

The deep voice at the entrance startled them both. Jael recognized his father's thinning frame standing just inside the flap, his own hood pulled up tight. "Father! What are you doing here? I thought it was your week to guard the castle?"

"Never mind that. I sent you to listen, and now you make enough noise to wake the dead." Jael's face grew hot, and he bowed his head.

"He sent you to spy--" Nei sputtered, but his father silenced her with a look.

"Tonight the clans gathered for the first time in all of history," his father said, arms gesturing widely to the carvings around them. "Do you have any idea why, Nei? Why it was necessary to watch?"

"Why is not your business!" she hissed. "You are not a clan leader, and neither are we. None of us should be talking about this."

One moment, Dolin leaned against the trunk and the next, he shifted in the room's deep shadows until he stood beside Nei, his fingers gripping her arm. "Don't you think it odd that our leaders are considering something as vile as war without discussing it with those of us who will fight in it? Who will die in it? Who better than to decide the fate of all gelfling than gelfling themselves?"

Nei tried to wrest her arm free, but Dolin's grip tightened as he leaned closer. His grasp only loosened when Jael stepped between them. His father's breath reeked of nebric, and Jael suppressed a shudder at the thought of eating flesh, even swamp grub flesh. *Only Skeksis eat--* He pushed aside the conflicting thoughts and placed his hand on his father's. "She's confused. She doesn't know anything, Father. Let her go, and I'll take her home."

His father had changed in the past weeks since Jael last saw him--jagged nails hoarding bits of dirt clashed against the cleanliness of his tunic, and harder, angrier eyes flashed at Jael. "Make sure she says nothing."

The growl that escaped his father was new, and despite his willingness to trust his father's words, Jael's stomach lurched. He nodded, but kept his eyes downcast to hide their confusion. She squirmed a moment when he took her hand, but she allowed him to push her

through the entrance flap. Once they'd escaped the meeting place, Nei wrenched free of his grasp.

"What's wrong with your father? He seemed...wrong. And what do you mean that I don't know anything? I know more than you. I stayed."

"He's just tired, Nei. Guarding the castle is hard work." *Please drop it*, he pled with his eyes. *I grow tired of making excuses for his ever-changing behavior. Maybe something--No.*

A dry twig snapped beneath his foot--another reminder that the rains hadn't come yet this trine. For fourteen months the fourteen moons rose and fell, and yet the drought seeped the energy from the Deep Wood. Animals migrated further away from the plains of Skarith, though it hardly seemed *that* unusual. *The droughts have come and gone for many generations now. It's certainly not proof that the Skeksis are evil.*

"You didn't answer my question," Nei whispered as they passed the temporary dwellings erected for the visiting Matriarch.

"If I tell you, will you swear to me that you will not tell your mother?"

She nodded, reaching out a hand for his face, but he backed away from the touch. "No--no dreamfasting. I will tell you."

She frowned, but followed him away from a nearby campfire to the edges of the village. Nei sat beside him on a nearby rock, and his ears caught the sharp, metallic chattering of an oulling as it flew overhead. He waited for the flapping of feathered wings to pass before he spoke. "No one else can hear this, Nei. No one."

"You've said that. What's so important that I must keep it from my mother? If it's that important, as leader of the Woodland Clan, she should know."

"No!" The word erupted from him like the cracking of beetle shells along the Black River, and she slid off the rock, her leathery-wings lifting her from the ground. "Wait--" he cried out. "I'm sorry, Nei. I didn't mean to startle you, it's just--well, my father says we can't tell anyone. At least hear what I have to say before you decide what to do. Besides, when have I ever led you to trouble? You trust me, don't you?"

She returned to the ground, her wings curled alongside her back, but she didn't return to the rock. Nei stood three gelfling away, and for all her fear, the corners of her lips perked at their corners. "Well, there was that one time you convinced me we should find the Gnarled Stone Tree. I thought my mother was going to blister my ears with her words when she found out why we needed two days food."

The tension between them lessened at the memory, and Jael shot her a grin a tad more genuine than before. *She's young. Three trine younger than your nineteen*, he reminded himself. "Do you believe the tale Rian told tonight? Of the machine that drains life? Essence?"

She gasped and leaned away from him, her legs set apart as her voice rose. "Essence. That's a Mystic word. How did you know it? You ran out before the dreamfasting."

"My father followed Rian at the castle."

Her mouth fell open, and she shook her head. "W-What? Your father, he witnessed this and said nothing about--"

"--My father says that Rian misinterpreted what he saw."

A light wind whispered through the forest. A chill spread across Jael's scalp, but Nei paid the wind no mind, focused instead on her question. "You know of this device that steals the essence of innocent podlings?"

"Not podlings," Jael answered. The idea brought bile to the back of his throat. The podlings were as gentle and peaceful as any creature of the Deep Wood. "The Scientist experiments on other lesser creatures, sure, but only to gain knowledge they might share with us as the urSkeks did."

"So only on the helpless creatures--ones that can't defend themselves...like podlings."

A nearby tree branch creaked as the oulling returned, his metal claws digging deep into the wood. Jael knew he shouldn't speak in front of it--it could be listening--but her accusation stung, and he hissed, "No! It's not like that, Nei. Look, they're the guardians of the Crystal, the one that gives life to our world. They use it to help us, so why would they betray us? Why should we trust the word of one gelfling over all the Skeksis? When have the Skeksis ever given us reason to doubt?"

"When they began toying with living creatures. Can't you see how wrong this is?" The flush across Nei's cheeks stood in contrast to her pale skin. Jael opened his mouth to retort, but she interrupted him with a pained whisper. "The Crystal gives everything life, but not so they can twist it into something dark. These experiments...they're evil, Jael. Like eating nebbie. Living creatures are meant to *live*."

That stench of his father's breath--he glanced around through lowered eyes. No one walked through the brush. Snores and shifts beneath blankets were the only sounds Jael heard, but the smell lingered, and he shivered. Nei touched his shoulder. "What they've done matters little to you and me. The clan leaders will decide what is best for gelfling. They will lead us to our future."

"They're making the wrong choice. The Matriarch will stand against the Skeksis, which means gelfling will die." He leaned down until his eyes were even with hers. "Do you want to die?"

She recoiled from him. The oulling's metallic cry echoed behind him, and he lowered his voice to a whisper. "Look, I know you want to trust your mother, as do I. All I'm asking is for the gelfling clan leaders to talk to the Skeksis, ask them for their side of the story--"

"If the Skeksis are enslaving our kind, do you really think talking to them is a good idea?"

It was Jael's turn to be surprised, and his stomach took the blow to his nerves with a sudden lurch. "Our kind?"

"You didn't know? You mean your father didn't tell you?"

She stood up taller, straighter as her wide eyes stared him down.

It's almost as bad as being in the same room as her mother. When Jael turned his head, she side-stepped, forcing herself in front of his gaze.

"Rian says the experiments went beyond podlings, Jael. That the missing gelfling were there in that castle as lifeless slaves."

Another moon set, and Jael could feel the coming rise of the Three Brothers. The sense of urgency set his foot to tapping. He didn't leap from his seat on the rock, though he wished nothing more than to escape to the woods with his plan.

"Rian's lying," he said. His tongue licked dry lips. "Only the Mystics steal away gelfling. You know this, Nei."

He expected more fear, but she didn't even twitch. Silence stretched between the two friends, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. When still she said nothing, he said, "Look, it's late, and we're both tired. We should talk in the morning."

Jael didn't wait for a response. He felt her eyes on his shoulder blades as he brushed past her and set off in the direction of his home. *It doesn't matter if she doesn't believe me.* The lie to her stung, but the lie to himself burned his stomach, and he clenched his eyes shut a moment. *This is my task. My responsibility to see that this war doesn't happen.*

He shoved aside the possibility that there was truth to Rian's tale, and his feet resumed their push home. The journey to the castle didn't bother him. Dangerous as it was, Jael's father made the trek twelve times a trine without much incident. But the realization that Nei didn't automatically believe him, hurt.

Jael wiped his eyes with the back one hand as his father's words whispered in his head, *She can't follow you everywhere forever, Jael. She has to grow up some time. As do you.* Words spoken two months prior, yet relevant now. *Father knew this would be my journey. It's why he came home.*

But when he brushed aside the entrance flap, the dwelling was empty.

His father was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

He was on his own.

A few hours sleep caught in the trees above, and it was time to set out. *Time to prevent a war.* He spent most of the evening packing a bag with several days' supplies before donning his lighter cloak--one meant to blend in among the trees. His gourd of water would only last so long, but fresh water was obtainable if he went south before west and followed the Green River to the castle. With his carry-pack slung across one shoulder, he poked his head around a tree trunk. No one in the village was about at this hour, and, satisfied he wasn't noticed, he stepped into the dense trees of the Deep Wood.

One last peek through the thick green, but his father was as absent as the rest of the gelfling. *Soon the suns will rise, bathing the woods in light. I need to be far from the village by then.* For several minutes, his footfalls were covered by the whistling wind. The sound covered

his exit from the village until he reached a small clearing by a stream where movement caught his eyes. By the dark hair and crouched position, Jael thought it to be his father, but when the fisherman retrieved his line from the stream, Jael stepped between a tree and the gelfling's line of sight.

Normally a walk through the woods was an adventure--a time to explore the dense lichen and the creatures that hid in the darkest corners of the trees. But as sweat trickled down Jael's forehead and his face mashed against the wet bark of the tree trunk, this was neither exploration nor an adventure. His ears strained for the snapping of twigs or the whisper of wings. His eyes scanned the brush for out-of-place colors, lightness where there should be darkness. He noticed nothing but the trickle of the stream and the plop of the fisherman's line hitting the surface of the water.

He was almost out of sight of the fisherman when the *womp* of wings sent him flat to the ground. His cloak--a leafy pattern of blues, browns, and greens--left him another set of leaves scattered across the forest floor.

"Jael? Jael, where are you?"

Nei. She called out for him again, and this time the fisherman paused in his task to search for the shouting voice. Jael hissed, "Nei!" He drew back his hood to expose his brown hair to the sky, and when she spotted him, he held a finger to his lips. *Nei* landed beside him with the crunching of dried leaves, and he winced.

"What are you doing here?" *Nei*'s cloak mirrored his own, and when he spotted the pack across her back, he gave a frantic shake of his head. "No, *Nei*. Go home."

"I'm going with you. Someone has to keep you out of trouble at the castle."

He scowled. *Of course she knows. She always knows my mind.* Jael said nothing as he turned from her and strode off in a northerly direction. She followed his steps with her wing beats until he halted a few feet away. "Nei, you can't come with me."

A single leaf fell from a branch overhead and landed in her almost white hair. Delicate fingers removed it, dropping it to the ground--a rare red among the brown and green. Another screech in the trees sent his eyes searching. *An oulling. Is it following me?*

In the moment's pause, Nei pressed four fingers to his cheek. The trees faded from Jael's sight, as did the oulling's cries. The Matriarch's dreamfasting with Rian flickered through him like metal-tipped oulling wings. A simple podling met Rian's gaze (though Jael swore it was he, not Rian, who stood in the Skeksis' lab).

Emptiness. Hollow blackness stared at Rian, never noticing the straps that held her to the chair. Nor did female podling notice when Rian struggled to undo the clasps at her wrists and ankles. Once freed of her restraints, she merely stood, watching nothing and no one. A scraping sound rang out and as Rian hid behind several cages, Jael's nerves screamed for him to hide as well. Jael tried to shut his eyes, but with the dreamfasting, there was no hiding from the truth.

Rian abandoned the essence-less creature to escape. Blood pooled on Jael's tongue. He couldn't tell if the oulling's metal beak pecked him, or if the Skeksis own black beak snapped his lip. As fast as the images poured into him, his own knowledge surged into Nei. All three times he'd been to the castle and met the Chamberlain. The tales told to him by the Skeksis his father trusted most.

"The Mystics--stealing away creatures for their own experiments, they are. Skeksis are friends. Only test on simple creatures. To help gelfling."

Then the words his own father spoke in support of the polite creatures who guarded the crystal.

"Rian is wrong. He misunderstood what he saw, Jael. If we trust them with the crystal, we can trust them with our lives. If they were betraying us, I would know. I'm in the castle day in and day out. If the Matriarch really are calling for a clan gathering, we must do everything in our power to change their minds. No one need die in some senseless battle."

When Nei's hand dropped away from Jael's cheek, he knew his own face mirrored hers-- a mix of skepticism and fear. Distrust. Now he knew the blood in his mouth was his own. He'd bitten the inside of his cheek at the shared vision.

Nei spoke first. "You think you can trust them, trust them enough to prevent a war."

"Yes."

"Do you still trust them after sharing sight with Rian?"

Jael swallowed the lump in his throat. "I-I'm not sure, but I have to talk to the Chamberlain and ask him. I have to find out the truth."

Her brows furrowed, but she nodded. "Then I'm coming with you. It's too dangerous to go alone."

Jael paused a moment before giving her a crooked smile. "Of course, you follow me everywhere."

Two friends set off alongside the stream as the first sun rose behind them. Neither noticed the oulling following overhead.

Nei grinned at his familiar frame weaving through the woods. *Almost like when we were little and hiding from each other near the Village.*

Jael's taller frame passed through the trees with such purpose that she scurried to keep up. Most of the day gone by, and they still remained in the Deep Woods. *At least the trees are thinning a bit*, she thought as she stepped around yet another stump. Though the rains hadn't arrived this trine, more than a dozen trees lay dying on the forest floor, their slender trunks snapped by some unseen force. A piece of splintered wood disintegrated into a pile of dust at her touch. "Jael," she hissed. He turned to watch the dust slip through her fingers.

"What is it?"

"It's wood. Rotted through and through," she said, wiping her hand across her leggings. "It's not age rot either. What could cause young trees to fall and die like this?"

The side of his neck pulse with the quickening of his heartbeat. He stared at the rotted remains, then shook his head. "Let's keep moving. I want to reach the edge of the forest by nightfall."

Her gaze lingered on the tree trunk a moment longer before she trailed behind him. They continued alongside the Green River, one of the few rivers of Thra still abundant with life. Unlike the Black River, whose waters grew darker and deadlier each year, the Green River still overflowed with fish no larger than Nei's ears. Oulling slept in the canopy overhead by day, but at night, the winged creatures hunted the silver-scaled fish of the Green River. *Jael says oullings are spies, but I think they're just attracted to the light.*

An oulling screeched overhead, and Nei pulled her hood closer to her face. The thinning of trees made for more light than dark, and her nerves itched at being so out in the open. *I miss the darkness of the inner Deep Wood already.* Here, the light of fourteen moons would expose the forest floor and them with it to whatever watched from high above. She shivered at the thought. *More than oulling watches here, I can feel it.*

Another cry far above them made Jael jump. She frowned as his step quickened with each forest sound. He hurried past another rotted tree without a single look. *I wish I could stop and investigate the cause, but something has Jael spooked. He's never spooked.* To him, she asked, "What's at the edge of the forest?"

Jael slowed his steps until she caught up, and once she walked alongside him, he pursed his lips. "The Fen of Ever-Living Trees. Assuming it still exists. After seeing those rotted trees, I'm...I'm not sure what we'll find there. Maybe all the trees have fallen. It would certainly make the trip easier."

Another oulling cried overhead, and Jael flinched before casting his gaze down to the moss covered floor. She ignored his unease, though her own skin tingled with chill despite the forest's warmth. "Easier how?"

"I'd forgotten you've never been past the edge of the woods. The ground in the fen shifts and flows on its own. Some places are shallow enough to walk through while others are deep enough to drown a landstrider. We'll have to be careful."

Nei tried to picture the swift landstriders sinking in water twenty feet deep and failed. Even if they weren't equipped with thick, long legs strong enough to topple a small tree, their

acute sense of hearing would surely keep them out of any sinking land. "If it's so dangerous, why travel through it? Why not go another way?"

"There are only three ways we can travel to reach the castle. One is through the fen. The second would force us through the Crystal Sea, an area so dry that my father says little lives there besides the Dousan Clan. Honestly," he said, "I'm not sure how they survive--even if they do have ways of whispering water from the crystalline sand."

"And the third?"

Jael hid his hands in his cloak as he bent over a sapling covered in a light coating of vellus hair. "This is an odd tree. Do you recognize it?" he asked. Nei pursed her lips together.

He's avoiding the question. She repeated it and watched as he peered ahead, his hand shielding his face from the setting Greater Sun. Each step heralded their presence. At first, she tried to ignore their obvious footfalls, but even Nei winced as several more oullings answered their passage through the edge of the Deep Wood.

Her ears twitched, and he sighed. "The last way is through the grasslands."

Nei leaned against a tree trunk and drank deeply from the water held in the clay bottle around her neck. "That's where the Mystics live, isn't it?"

Several screeches carried from the trees, and both gelfling jumped at the cacophony of wings as the oullings took flight. Jael shushed her and waved an unsteady hand in her direction until the wing beats ceased. "Don't even mention their name. You never know who might be listening," he whispered. "You ready to move on? I really do want to be free of the forest by suns' setting."

She nodded, though her shoulders ached from the pack across her back, and her legs grew weary of trekking across the expansive woods. *I can't exactly complain*, she thought as she followed him through the brush. *I forced my way into his journey. If I give up now, who knows what will happen to him out here alone?*

Jael's thoughts remained as private as her own as they traveled on, growing closer to the edge of the woods. The trees shifted further from the immense GenTak, whose branches stretched wide enough to darken the woods, to smaller, thinner trees. White-barked and blade thin, these trees only dotted the wetter landscape, leaving more clearing than forest as they approached the fen. Nei could now walk the length of ten gelfling without touching another tree. Two of the suns glared off pools of water, but the Dying Sun ever remained in the sky, its pale, blue light casting a chill across the evening.

Their pace slowed as Jael picked his way around each pool, careful not to step in the swampy water, and Nei followed in his footsteps. A bubble erupted with a *splorch* to the left of Nei, and when she glanced down, she found her feet sinking an inch in the sticky mix of mud and decaying leaves.

"I'm sinking!" She tried not to betray her panic, but her voice cracked over the words.

"Keep moving. Try to stick to solid ground."

She lifted one foot and then the other, but walking felt more like crawling, and soon both of them were calf deep in sludge. The last tendrils of the Greater Sun's light dipped out of view, and from within the trees, Nei could hear the clacking of metallic nails against wooden branches. Jael removed a torch from his pack, along with two smooth, grey stones. A few taps

later, the torch lit the area around them. Darkness didn't frighten Nei, but as she thought of land that moved when it ought not to, she shivered. "H-how big is the fen?"

"Large enough to cover most of the land between here and the castle."

"I never realized the trip was so--" One leg sunk to the knee, and she cried out in surprise. Jael grabbed her by the elbow and pulled, freeing her leg, but when he released his grip, he slid across the muck to land on his side.

"Give me a hand here." He held his hand out to her.

"If I pull, won't I end up falling as well? Let me see if I can find something to pull you out with." Nei glanced around. One of the trees nearby bore branches low enough for her to reach, and she trudged through the mud until she reached it. Her breath came in small gasps from the exertion, but she ignored it. She retrieved her hand axe from its belt loop and bowed her head.

Thank you, mighty tree. Nei swung her axe at one red-lichen covered branch.

The blade hit the wood just as Jael shouted, "Stop!"

The warning was too late. The stone bit into the tree's flesh.

As Nei turned in Jael's direction, something hard and solid connected with her. The world blurred as something tossed her several gelfling away, and for a moment, she saw only darkness punctuated by blotchy light. The earthy smell, rich with iron and decay, told her it was only mud covering her vision. She sat up sputtering, bits of leaves and muck dripping from the tip of her nose and lips. Nei tried to wipe the stuff from her face, but her hands were as covered as the rest of her. All she managed to do was smear the sludge around some more. In addition to the mess, her side smarted from connecting with the tree branch, which now bent down

protectively across the tree. While it didn't move any further, its trunk had shifted, and two hollow pits in the wood lent the impression of eyes watching her. Waiting.

She shivered, and when the mud grew colder around her hands and feet, she half-climbed, half-swam to a patch of green growth a gelfling away. Fistfuls of moss cleared most of the muck from her face, though her clothing was a hopeless mess. When she stood on her two feet again, she was more brown than green and tan. "The tree--it's alive! Well, of course it's alive, but it's aware!"

Another *splorch* answered her and then silence.

"Jael?"

Nei spun in a circle, but he was nowhere in sight. She stepped off the small hill and sank to her knees. Ignoring the shifting soil, she squatted shoulder-deep and waded in the direction he'd last been. Hands outstretched, she groped around in the mud until her fingers brushed something solid. "Jael!" she shouted, driving her hands deeper into the mud until they grasped something flimsy. Something like his hood.

She tugged at the fabric, and as it broke over the surface, it tore. A scrap of green came up, but no Jael. Nei dropped the torn hood and drove her fingers deeper until her chin dipped below the mud. Nei spit the gritty mud from her mouth before reaching underneath Jael's arms. The mud pulled her closer to the sinkhole, but she dug in her heels as she dragged Jael through the sludge. Once she stood and her tan-now-brown wings cleared the mud, she beat them and sent a cascade of brown spinning in all directions.

Nei continued to drag him inch by inch from the mud until, exhausted, she reached the mossy bank. A mass of goopy leaves and mud from head to toe, Jael hung limply in her arms.

He wasn't breathing.